

**Conversation
on
Faith**

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CONVERSATION ON FAITH

by
Eberhard Müller

translated by
John W. Doberstein

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*To the Evangelical Theological Faculty of
the University of Tübingen in gratitude for
theological instruction received as a stu-
dent and the honor of a doctorate in theology
bestowed in 1955*

Foreword

The following chapters are an attempt to give the man of the twentieth century some instruction with regard to the main features of the Christian faith. Instruction is something other than superficial information, for in matters of faith the latter would actually communicate nothing at all. What we are striving for here is instruction in the real sense of the word, which means that we shall attempt to fashion and mold the Christian message in the terms of our time and the thought forms of the critical, inquiring person of today.

Any attempt to give instruction with regard to the Christian faith must therefore stimulate some thinking about this faith and, as far as it is possible for us human beings, the right kind of thinking. All reflection begins with following the track of the thinking and of the knowledge that others and we ourselves have followed. As we pursue this path, we check whether and to what extent we have solid ground under our feet. In so far as we find this to be so, we can profess this faith as our own. To be sure, when we do this it will become apparent that we cannot explore the ground of faith in the same way that one might examine the consistency of ground on which one wishes to build a road. Each kind of knowledge must be discovered in the ways that are proper to it. And so it is with the insights of faith. Therefore the first chapters of this book are concerned primarily with the question of what kind of reflection and which course of knowledge are right when what we are after is to achieve a distinction between error and truth in matters of faith.

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A person who fails to descry stars in the sky with a microscope before his eye is certainly not justified in casting doubt upon their existence. Anybody who is unable to explain the Christian faith by means of scientific observation and philosophical logic is certainly far from having the means to dispute its validity. Anybody who engages in thought must exercise his critical ability, his power of discrimination. But first he must apply it to himself.

The following exposition of the Christian faith is intended to be read by any thinking person. It therefore had to avoid as much as possible any confusing excess of theological ways of attacking questions. Pastoral considerations sometimes had to be given priority over systematic theological points of view. The attempt has been made to describe the central content of the Christian confession and to interpret and support it with the statements of the Bible and the apostolic creed. When we do this, we find that many of the doubts and stumbling blocks that a modern man encounters in his search for faith have their foundation, not in the Bible, but rather in mistaken ideas that people have about the message of the Bible. What looks like solid dogmatism often turns out to be simply false faith, once we look at the Holy Scriptures. On the other hand, many a seemingly insurmountable obstacle to thought proves, upon more careful reflection, to be a mirage of blinded reason. In this sense we must constantly be making critical distinctions if ever we are to arrive at our own clear statements of faith. At the same time, the Christian faith must be set down in the situation of modern man if its meaning and importance for our own life and our world today is to be seen. Here we attempt to do both.

This book has a number of antecedents. Some twenty years ago, when I was a student secretary, I published a summary of Christian teaching for laymen under the title *Dogma Un-*

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derstood (*Verstandenes Dogma*). It was written in the time when the church was coming to grips with National Socialism, and when I returned from the war I was no longer satisfied with it. In the course of innumerable conversations with soldiers and students who were estranged from the church it was borne in upon me that this earlier book was suited only for use within the church. It was therefore not reissued. I wished to write especially for people who were searching, however, in order to present the faith to them. After the war I therefore published a second book, entitled *We Believe the Truth* (*Wir glauben die Wahrheit*). My original intention was to follow it up with a second part on the second article of the creed. The press of work in which I was involved in the administration of the Evangelical Academy prevented me from completing it. Meanwhile, ten years have elapsed since that little book was written. A great number of discussions with people from all areas of modern life have prompted me to rework in altered and shortened form the chapters written then into a new book which would deal with all three articles of the Christian creed.

That postwar book appeared in postwar dress and today nobody is likely to reach for such a book. Those who purchased the book *We Believe the Truth* at that time will probably not be annoyed to find its essential content presented here in shortened and improved form and supplemented with the second part which was then envisioned.

I conclude my address to the reader with two words of thanks. I thank my friend and co-worker, the Rev. Werner Simpfendörfer, for many valuable suggestions and for preparing the indexes and the Bible References. I also owe a debt of gratitude to many readers of my earlier publications; even into the last months they have continued to encourage and urge me to complete this work of presenting the Christian faith to the inquiring modern man. Without this urging I should hardly

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have mustered the time and strength to write this book in the midst of the pressure of my daily work. May the answers I have tried to give to the questions of faith open for my readers a window to that reality which only God can make us see.

Bad Boll, summer of 1957

Eberhard Müller

Preface to the American Edition

It is with special pleasure that I write a brief word to accompany the American edition of this book. Through repeated visits to the United States, I have gained many insights and also many friendships with American Christians. Particularly, the systematic study of the art of discussion, the results of which are taught in the schools and universities of America, has become of very great importance for the work I have been directing at the conference center of the Evangelical Academies. It has been utilized in hundreds of group discussions I have conducted and also the concerted endeavors in which Christians and non-Christians have met together to seek an answer to the ultimate questions of life. The fruit of these discussions is gathered together in this book. I am happy that this provides me with an opportunity to express to American readers my gratitude for what I have received from America in years past.

July 21, 1960
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Eberhard Müller

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PART ONE

Man Facing the Personal God

The Way from Solitariness to the "Thou"

In every person who has not lost the will to live and vigor of spirit there is, whether he admits it or not, a yearning for a "thou." Only in the meeting of "I" and "thou" do we realize ourselves as human beings, and apart from this meeting we know no real happiness. It is the tragedy of our time that it possesses the goods of happiness in staggering abundance and has at its command powerful instruments to cope with almost every vicissitude of life and yet man is in peril of losing himself, his "I," and likewise the "thou," his neighbor, and thus the experience of true happiness. At the beginning of our thinking together about ourselves, about man, and about God, we therefore stop to reflect upon the nature of "I" and "thou" and the way from one to the other.

What Is Human Dignity?

People talk a great deal these days about human dignity. Respect for the human being, they say, must again be the central concern. The unhappiness of the world today comes from too much emphasis upon the means rather than upon persons. What we have seen is a "revolt of the means." Strictly speaking, man is no longer the possessor of his money and the master of economic production or the weapons of war. On the contrary, these means have acquired an autonomy of their own by which they control and dominate man.

There is certainly much that is true in this idea, but we cannot pursue it further now. The only question that interests us

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at the moment is: Against whom was this "revolt of the means" staged? What is this human dignity which is allegedly being so often outraged today? How can it happen that in the very age of human technics the humanness of man is imperiled?

We hear today from many quarters the complaint that the whole modern economy, in particular the labor process that dominates it, no longer permits people to be "men." True, there are many who hold the simple opinion that being a man begins with being paid a definite sum as a weekly wage. But even though it is true that there are wages that are unworthy of human dignity, this still does not bring us to the heart of the matter. What matters far more is the fact that the worker and many others who live in dependent circumstances feel that they have become mere cogs in a great machine. Their labor capacity is simply *used* in the labor process by way of the labor market. And when to this are added some special contrivances which underscore the impersonal character of the whole process, such as psychotechnical tests in the employment office and all sorts of checks and controls on the job, one begins to feel that one's human dignity has been wounded. We are not concerned here with discussing to what extent many of these contrivances are simply the inevitable result of our machine age. Certainly the greater part of them do not originate simply in the evil will of individual persons. What we want to know is what is really so painfully missing here. What is missing is that a man is no longer a "thou," no longer the bearer of a personal value and dignity, but merely represents a complex of mental and physical capacities that can be utilized in a great economic process of production which is comparable to the processes of nature.

The Royalty of Being a Person

Man is therefore more than an aggregate of various attributes. The individuality of a man does not consist merely in his having qualities different in this or that respect from other people.

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Beyond these qualities there is still something particular, something incapable of being grasped objectively—the human person, his “I” or “self.” The qualities of a man are inseparably bound up with his “self.” The royalty of the person is wounded when the means by which it expresses itself, its physical and intellectual capacities, are valued more highly than the person itself, or, as frequently happens, when the means cause us to forget the person altogether.

This becomes clearest in that area of life which we usually call the most personal of all—the realm of marriage. It receives its dignity and its happiness from the fact that here two persons, “I” and “thou,” really meet each other and free themselves from the solitariness of the ego. Marriage is marred when either of the two partners disregard and wound the mystery of the other’s person. This often happens even in the way in which one seeks a marriage partner. Often it is not a “thou” that is sought at all, but simply a being in possession of certain qualities. That being must, for example, be smart, pretty, and healthy; it must have money, be able to cook, and understand economy. This depersonalization of a partner is carried to its extreme when the other partner is merely used as an object of lust and pleasure without at the same time affirming an abiding intellectual and spiritual fellowship with him or her. People who still have some sense of the nobility of the human person react in anger and sadness and say, “When this happens, one is no longer a human being.”

A Man Searching for a “Thou”

There is a more high-minded and more unconscious form of this depersonalization of a marriage partner. I once visited an old friend who was an extraordinarily upright and, in fact, a very noble character. He was well along in years. In a confidential moment I asked him why he had never married. He replied: “You will surely laugh at me if I tell you the truth.

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I simply never found the right woman." This surprised me, since he had lived a rich life in which he had come in daily contact with people of his own way of thinking and his own culture. So I asked what kind of woman he had wanted. He told me that he had probably learned to know many women who would have pleased him. But it was always as if someone had put a jinx on it; these women had always been already married or at least engaged. He even admitted that there had been times when he had known a girl for years without the thought occurring to him that this might be the right one—until she had become engaged to another fellow. Then he had suddenly awakened to the fact that again he had missed his luck.

I said to him: "Your whole misfortune has been that you are too prudent. You are too wise and also too decent not to know that a pretty face, money, property, and other attributes of a marriage partner do not add up to happiness in a marriage. What you are looking for in your future partner is the beauty of love; in short, you are seeking a 'thou' who will make you happy in your solitariness. This 'thou' that reveals itself in the beauty of love never flashes out upon you because you have forgotten one thing: the only one who finds a 'thou' is the one who gives an 'I.' "

The Way to Meeting

Young people usually manage this better than older bachelors. They are not so prudent and deliberative. Nor do they sit like Caesar on the throne of their ego, letting people march by and observing what qualities they have and who most perfectly embodies the desired capacities. It is rather the other way around. It is the "thou," the "adored one," who sits on a throne; and the ones who love consider what they must do in order to be accepted by the other. They consider what qualities they themselves must possess in order to please the other person. All their thought is focused on being what the other would

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have them be. Thus they crawl out of the snail shell of their own self-centered solitariness, in which overprudent persons anxiously encapsulate themselves, and at least tentatively try to approach the "thou." Then the miracle happens; not infrequently this approach triggers the other person's willingness to do the same thing in genuine love. This is the way in which "I" and "thou" meet. It is not merely a meeting of two shells; it is not just such and such attributes of people meeting each other. It is they themselves who find each other. On this fact is based the wisdom of the proverb: "Happy is the wooing that is not long a-doing." This saying would be even more true if everybody who has found a "thou" in this way were to continue the rest of his life to seek the "thou" anew each day, instead of retreating into his thick-shelled ego in order there to enjoy his conquest.

All these considerations are pertinent not only to the matter of finding a human partner. When we deal with the question of the Invisible and Mysterious, which we call God, here too we must guard against treating him in a way which we would not stand for ourselves. But does not modern man do this constantly?

Rationalists and Bachelors

Does not the enlightened, cultivated man in most cases inquire about God in the same way that an older bachelor looks around for a wife? Modern man not only often trespasses upon the human dignity of his fellow man; in his search for God he violates, sometimes in gross ways and sometimes in very subtle and refined ways, the mystery of God, his real being, the sovereignty of the divine person.

There are many people who, strictly speaking, are not looking for God at all. What they are looking for is divine attributes which appear to them to be important and indispensable. They consider that it is very difficult to go on indefinitely coping with

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the riddles of life and the spiteful assaults of fate without some divine help. So the day comes when they seek for God, perhaps even begin to pray to him. But they are not really seeking God himself. They are not seeking him in order to surrender to him. They are only seeking his attributes and his help. Will God allow himself to be investigated, in the way in which one can investigate the attributes of a man? Will he offer his help on trial, like a merchant who wants to sell his wares? Will he reveal his power to those who want only his power on their side, but find that they can get along for the present without his wisdom, righteousness, and holiness? Can one find God's "Thou" at all if one seeks only his attributes and is only secondarily interested in God himself?

"Religious Values"

Of course it is true that many honest people are searching for something far more than external advantages when they interest themselves in religion. Many people today have come again to recognize that science, law, art, education, indeed, the whole common life of nations urgently need to be grounded in a higher order of things. They are groping again for the ordering hand of God in order to take hold of it. They are inquiring again about God's Word and the ordinances of the Bible in order to find some share of divine wisdom. Today people would like again to be able to appeal to a higher authority for their laws, their education, their science, their theology, so that they might be able to order this world better and stand their ground in it better than they do. So they read the Holy Scriptures to secure material and spiritual foundations and weapons which can be used against the uncertainty of human knowledge.

But as soon as God himself is dislodged from the center of their interest, as soon as social, political, scientific, or any other human aims become the only determinant of faith, the ordi-

nances of divine wisdom can just as easily be turned into folly as can the ordinances of men. Religious values without surrender to God himself are like "love in itself" with no object to which that love is directed.

This explains why many who try the Christian faith for a while are just as much disappointed with it as they are with the Hindu philosophies, the healing methods of the medical sects, or the doctrines of the social reformers. You cannot study or try religion in the way in which you try on a suit to see if it fits, or in the way in which one tries a method of utilizing labor in a factory. The man who considers only that to be true which "works" sometimes fails to find the very things that work best. The ordinances of God and religion as a whole do not "function" in the hands of those who are looking only for a "functional value." When people reach out for the ordering hand of God merely to find a solution to their worldly problems, God eludes them, because they are closing their hearts to God. Sometimes these people realize, to their horror, that all the while they thought they were holding on to God's ordering hand, they were actually holding on to its outward form—the outlines of external rules and laws. It is as if only the glove were left to them and, quite unawares, somebody else—perhaps the devil?—had slipped his hand into it and led them down the garden path. But when they wake up to this fact they throw out the whole business and conclude that it is better to stick it out alone and depend on their own reason.

Modern Man and Hobson's Choice

But there are also people who really do seek only God himself, the high, sublime, loving, divine Thou. For them God is in no way merely a utility value which they try to get hold of for their own advantage. Their whole soul yearns for God. They make every effort to find him; except that, when they do so, they make the same mistake as my friend the aging

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bachelor. It is their fate to be modern men, which means that they are men of an advanced age, an age in which people have become so wise and cautious that they must first observe and weigh everything carefully before they surrender their hearts. They must first ponder whether this is the right God whom they are about to approach. There is nothing wrong with this kind of deliberation. Especially for people whose fate it is to have become wise, it is just as unavoidable as the anxious deliberations of an older person who hesitates before he gives himself to a "thou." So modern man is faced with Hobson's choice, which, of course, is no choice at all; and it is almost inevitable that modern men should set themselves upon the judgment throne in place of God. They set up a "march-past" of the religions and philosophies, as the Romans of old did with their slaves, in order to select the most beautiful and best of them. The result is usually some kind of hybrid religion in which those religious customs, dogmatic views, and moral precepts that appear to be plausible and useful are mixed together. The consequence is a religion without God, a "world view," but not faith. This is a profound tragedy.

God as a "Ruler-Slave"

It often happens that these sophisticated and yet seeking people imagine that they have found a faith, that now they really have a God to whom they can pray and whom they can trust. In reality they have found something else. They have found what modern psychology calls a "ruler-slave" (*Regiersklave*).

In other words, there are people who are caught in a fatal contradiction: On the one hand, as "modern men," they want to be masters in their own house and not surrender themselves to love or to serve anybody else; on the other hand, they do not want to bear the responsibility for their lot in this complicated and uncertain life all alone. So they keep a "ruler-slave"; they

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always seek somebody to relieve them of responsibility when hard decisions are to be made and heavy burdens borne. They look for a slave, in other words, a being who will always discreetly withdraw whenever his presence is not desired.

The fatal and yet pleasant thing about this situation is that the owner of such a "ruler-slave" is never conscious of the fact that he is using such a slave every day. He himself is completely gullible and has not the slightest notion that he is constantly deceiving himself. It takes somebody who knows the mind and soul to open his eyes for him. And not until that happens does he learn that in actuality he is all alone and that the slave and the ruler he thinks are hovering about him are nothing but the reflections of his own human ego, that wobbles between craven fear and the desire to dominate.

Unmasking the Specters

The unmasking of the specters with which a man surrounds himself is a bitter business. And not infrequently men persecute with a passionate hatred those who effect this unmasking. They are accused of intolerance even when they simply point out in a friendly spirit that one cannot depend on the gods, which are not lords but actually the "ruler-slaves" of men, and that therefore one ought to be warned against them. The ancient Romans found such warnings disagreeable and their priests considered them an absolute outrage. How can a state endure if its citizens no longer believe in its religious ceremonies? So the Christians were persecuted and accused of being enemies of mankind.

The Romans, of course, learned in their persecution of Christianity that even the blood of the martyrs did not pump new life into the old gods. The only faith that has power is the faith of the man who really surrenders to God because he trusts him. Hence, for the enlightened man there is no way to faith except that which is indicated in Jesus' words: "Unless you turn and

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become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 18:3).

But then this saying of Jesus puts a new barrier across the way to God, which perhaps we had just begun to see opening up a little. For it is possible that a man grown old and wise may one day decide to throw overboard all his doubts and cast himself into the arms of a "thou," his real or supposed love, and flee from his solitariness. But he cannot become a child again, and if he actually tried to be like a child, it would turn him into a disillusioned fool or a childish Dadaist. A man must be released by the loving "thou" from the prison of solitariness if he is to escape it. Otherwise, he remains his own prisoner forever.

We cannot at this point discuss how this can happen. And we must guard against throwing ourselves into faith as we would into a love adventure which afterward may turn out to be a great delusion.

A Leap in the Dark?

Let us remain, for the moment at any rate, with our sober thinking, always remembering, however, that it can lead us to knowledge only if at the same time we keep ourselves open for genuine encounters with God. It would be quite wrong to say that faith in God originates in a mindless, unthinking leap into the dark. We cannot and we dare not simply strangle our thought processes, whose function is to distinguish between truth and delusion. Like all genuine knowledge, faith springs from an encounter with reality and with history. Anybody who wants to be a doctor must be open and receptive, not only to the mysteries of the human body and the human mind, but also to the knowledge that earlier generations have gained in this field. Anybody who tried to know God immediately and directly, without paying any attention to the experience of earlier generations with God, would turn out to be a religious quack.

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Every scientist therefore builds—though never uncritically—upon an intellectual tradition that supports him and enables him to increase his knowledge and insight. So in matters of faith too we stand in an intellectual connection with the faith of our fathers, indeed, with influences from all the religions of the world. Let anybody who wants to think seriously about God have no hesitation about searching the world of religions and let him also immerse himself in the faith of his fathers. In both cases it should be done critically.

The Search of the Religions for the Hidden God

Is it really so important which faith one belongs to? And is it even possible to decide what is right and what is wrong in matters of faith? What tremendous efforts men have expended from time immemorial to placate the gods! Think of all the strife that has been caused by the question of which is the right way to do this! Haven't we modern men outgrown this quarreling about God and isn't it best to apply ourselves to tangible things?

When we stop to weigh this question, it occurs to us that it is not always the tangible things that are the most constant and secure. Often it is the imponderable that has the deciding weight. If there really is a God—and who can deny this with certainty?—then he is also the only one upon whom everything, fortune and misfortune, present and future, depends. Anybody who does not close his mind from the start to this possibility because it is disagreeable and disturbing must ask himself: "What did my fathers believe? What do other religions believe? And what do I myself know about God?"

The Dividing Line of Paganism

If God were a thing, a force, a principle, or an idea, he would perhaps be something that we human beings might be able to grasp if we seriously tried to do so. The Creator Spirit in whom Christians believe is not "ready at hand," available and disposable whenever one wishes to use him. His creatures in the world are "at hand," and therefore we can make them the object of our observations and our proofs. We can subject them to our

investigation. But God is not something that is subject to men. We must reckon with the possibility that he is not what the Bible asserts, and at this point the Bible draws a clear dividing line that separates it from all pagan conceptions of God and all philosophical ideas of God. It is important that we make this distinction very clear.

God, a Mysterious Force?

When we look out into the world of religions we see a great profusion of conceptions of God. In primitive paganism the conviction that God is a mysterious force is most prominent. The divine force may be connected with particular objects (stones, springs, trees, et cetera). Later on it is primarily a living force, the power of generation, which is venerated, for example, in the symbol of a bull. The power of light has also been worshiped in the sun.

In more recent times this concept of God experienced a kind of revival in a different form, when men revered as divine the forces of blood, race, and the nation. Wherever nature is equated with God or economic forces are regarded as the motive forces of this world, we have fundamentally the same view.

It is seldom denied that God or "the divine" has control over these ruling forces. Sometimes these forces are thought of as being world-embracing, but they are never personal forces. Since the human mind is capable of exploring these forces and then of controlling them in some way, this kind of religiosity is bent upon exploring the divine in order to bring it into the power of man.

Magic and Science as God Tamers

Of course, even here it is recognized that these mysterious divine forces are superior to the average man. But the magician who knows their secret and the sage who has explored their laws can nevertheless bend them to his will, just as the technician

knows how to harness the mightiest forces of nature. Man in this instance is like a tamer who is quite aware of the fact that his lion or his elephant is many times more powerful than he is. He knows very well that these powerful beasts are touchy and that one can't always do what he pleases with them. But if one cleverly conforms to their inner laws and if one possesses the necessary mental energy—or, in case of need, a magic formula—it is possible to approach them without fear.

Modern man too is always attempting, as it were, to play the role of tamer opposite to God. And he does this not only when he conjures away his fate with an amulet or when he plays the astrologer and reads the stars in order to arrange his affairs accordingly. Man does this also when he declares himself an atheist and makes nature or economic development his god and then, as their master, attempts to dominate them by means of science.

God, a Higher Being?

Besides these primitive forms of religion there are those in which there is some awareness that God is a "higher being." In antiquity the gods were sometimes represented in mixed forms, with a human head and the body of an animal. This is a good symbol for what we mean here. One senses in these religions something of the lordship of God. He is not merely a powerful, though blind, force; there is something personal about him, perhaps even a degree of moral will. But this is only partially true. For the gods are subject to a certain bondage to their passions and urges, to the power of fate or the eternal, immutable law.

Similar ideas of God are to be found in the modern world. We are referring to those religious concepts in which God is conceived as the Creative Spirit and at the same time has a moral will ascribed to him. God is thought of as a kind of "inventor of the cosmic clock"; but he too is subject to certain

limitations and laws. Above all, he is subject to the laws of nature, which even he cannot alter.

Manipulating the Higher Being

Thus in times past as well as today there are religious conceptions which attribute to God, or to the gods, personal freedom on the one hand and on the other certain dependences, whether they be bondages to instinctual urges, natural law, or fate. These dependences make it possible for man not only to approach the gods in prayer and worship, but also to make them the object of human calculations and religious manipulations. For this purpose a variety of forms, some of them degenerating to the magical, were available. Most of the pagan customs of sacrifice must also be put in this classification.

Sacrifice is ambiguous in meaning, like the pagan gods themselves. Sacrifice contains a genuine germ of truth. It can mean the sincere surrender of the person who offers the sacrifice to God. Thus the Old Testament believer offered the best lamb of his flock in order to show his love and reverence for God and by this token acknowledged that actually everything—his whole flock, even his children and he himself—was God's possession. Something of this loving, humble surrender to God is to be found again and again even in paganism. It may be found also among modern non-Christians, and therefore in them too there is something—sometimes a great deal—of genuine fear of God.

On the other hand, one finds in Christendom people who have fallen back into semipagan forms of religion. This happens, for example, when people have the idea that they can not only petition God in their prayers but also force him. There are Christians too who do thank God with their good works but want to pay him. In all these ways God is being treated fundamentally as a kind of hybrid being, to whom, on the one hand, some personal attributes are being ascribed, but who, on

the other hand, is being treated as one treats things and energies according to definite laws and rites.

Religion, the Sin of Divination

So, even though there are pagans who are half Christians, and Christians who are half pagan, the difference between paganism and the Christian faith is nevertheless basically clear. The "higher beings" worshiped by the pagans are half animal and half human, half nature and half masters of nature. The purpose of the reek of pagan sacrifice is not only to express a man's surrender to his god; its primary intent is that it be smelled by the gods in order to appease them and conjure up their beneficial presence. Against this the prophet Samuel in the Bible lashed out: "Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as the sin of divination, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry" (I Sam. 15:22-23).

No human religion is safe from this sin of divination (I Sam. 15:22ff.), when it makes God the object of human investigation and human manipulation. Indeed, even the highest form of human religiosity, the piety of high moral action, contains something of this if the purpose of its acts is to earn or even compel the recognition of God and his presence.

God, the Absolute?

There is still a third way in which man seeks to lay hold upon God. People who hold this view are aware that God cannot be grasped. Not what is tangible, but what is behind all things, their ideas, the primal idea of the One, the Absolute—this is God. The Absolute is that which is free and disengaged from all things, the pure idea or concept, sometimes absolute nothingness. This is revered as the Ultimate Reality.

The attempt here is to do justice to the fact that things and forces are not God himself. The man who proceeds in this

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fashion knows that behind these things and forces are the ideas of a creative mind, just as the idea of an automobile is present in the mind of the constructor before the automobile comes into being. Thus here we have a serious effort to deal with the fact that God is the power behind the really creative in the world. But what is forgotten is that above the ideas is the mind that thinks them. Wherever man proposes to grasp God through a knowledge of the Absolute, a pure idea of God, he is again making himself a god.

Mysticism's Path to Nothingness

Like the others, the concept of God as the Absolute is bound up with a characteristic way of approaching God. It is the way of thought or the way of mysticism. This is, above all, the way of the great Eastern religions. Not by way of the free self-revelation of God does man know his Creator; man himself is able to grasp the Absolute through earnest reflection or to descend into its depths through mystical meditation.

There is, it is true, a Christian form of mysticism. It is the loving surrender of the mind and soul to God. And there is something of this genuine mysticism in these pagan religions. So they too have some knowledge of genuine fear of God. At bottom, however, this pagan mysticism is something quite different. Here man, who has come to realize that he is utterly incapable of grasping God, believes that he can ultimately force union with him by sacrificing his own existence. He believes, so to speak, that in the sacrificial incense of his self-immolation he becomes wedded to the Absolute. In self-renunciation he attains to godhood, soars to the stars, and in this ultimate way escapes his real fate, the fate of being a creature who is subject to his Creator and by no means can ever lay hold upon his God.

Where Is the Great "Thou"?

All human conceptions of God in which men attempt to

The Search of the Religions for the Hidden God

grasp and understand him are attempts to extend man's sphere of power so as to include God. Therefore the Bible forbids man to construct any concept of God whatsoever: " 'You shall not make yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath' " (Exod. 20:4).

If man is completely incapable of grasping God and utterly unable to picture him, must we then give up seeking God? Of course, it is useless for man to seek God if this means that his purpose is to construct an idea of God and then analyze and prove this idea. As we have seen, in this way one cannot even find a human "thou," much less a divine! It is useless for a solitary person to seek a "thou" unless the other person is also seeking him. He cannot find the "thou" if the other cuts himself off from him. He may perhaps coerce the "thou" intellectually and physically, but still he remains solitary. And so it is with man and God. Our search for him is in vain unless he himself comes to meet us.

Meeting God and Knowing God

Every person who is not intellectually indifferent has the desire to penetrate the mystery of things that are important to him. Even small children frequently have the urge to take a clock apart to see how it works. We quite rightly believe that we have not understood a thing until we have gotten a clue to its inner working and being.

This urge is described by the word "interest," which comes from the Latin *interesse*, "to be between or in the middle of something." We want to be in the middle of a thing in order to understand it from the inside.

This is also true when we are interested, not in things, but in persons. Of course, we cannot get at their being when we treat them and observe them as if they were things. Here we must pursue a totally different route in order to "get into the middle." But what route must be taken when we begin to take an interest in what holds the world together? How must we proceed if we want to know God?

What Does It Mean to "Seek God"?

Sometimes we men have great flashes of insight when we suddenly grasp the meaning of a single word. So it was with Luther in his monastery cell when he finally understood what Paul meant by the "righteousness of God."

Something like this could happen to a modern God-seeker if it were to dawn on him what the Bible means when it enjoins us to seek God. It means something completely different from what modern man means. When modern man thinks of it, he means the strained efforts by which the human mind seeks God in the phenomena of this world or in the ideas that he derives from them. He may perhaps also mean some method or other

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of attaining the highest kind of religious or moral achievement, by which he hopes to unite himself with the Highest.

The Bible denies that such a method leads to the true knowledge of God. To be sure, the Bible does say that we should seek God. There are many passages in it like these: " 'Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near' " (Isa. 55:6). " 'You will seek me and find me; when you seek me with all your heart, I will be found by you, says the Lord' " (Jer. 29:13). "I love those who love me, and those who seek me diligently find me" (Prov. 8:17). But when we consider the way in which the Bible speaks of seeking God, we note that the men of the Bible were not seeking an idea or a concept of God. They sought "the Lord." They had come to know that the unutterably sublime Mind which had called the world into being is the Creator, and that he was also their Creator, and consequently their Lord. They understood that one cannot seek him as one seeks earthly things or earthly knowledge, and also that man himself cannot determine when and where he is to be found. On the contrary, they believed that everyone who would rightly seek God must pray to be found of him, and, what is more, must pray to him with the humility that is due to the Lord. Above all, they understood that one must do God's will if one wants to please him and that one cannot approach him, even with the greatest of sacrifices, gifts, and accomplishments, except as one finds his good pleasure.

But all this leads to the realization that one does not find God in seeing and searching and proving, nor in strained endeavor or spiritual, mystical intoxication. One finds him quite simply in hearing him and belonging to him.

The Way of Objective Knowledge

According to the Bible, this is the point where the way of the pagan philosophers and the way of the biblical seekers after God separate. If you were to ask the Greek wise man Aristotle

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how one arrives at a sure knowledge of ultimate truths, he would recommend the way of *theoria*, the way of dispassionate, objective contemplation, which concentrates wholly upon the object which is to be known. The more the searcher succeeds in eliminating his own person, his own will and feelings, the more he will succeed in grasping a true understanding of the object. The scientific work of the last decades has demonstrated very clearly the limitations of this method. True as it is that the searcher must free himself of preconceived opinions and be completely open to the object of his study, he must realize just as clearly that he himself, his own "I," is always present and that his own thought forms and feelings make their contribution whenever he tries to grasp something that is real. If this applies to knowledge of the things of this world, how much more is it required that we throw in our whole being when it comes to knowing God!

The Way of Personal Surrender

Therefore the Bible commends the way that is the opposite of that of Aristotle. It speaks of a kind of knowledge which modern philosophy, following Kierkegaard's lead, tries to indicate by the term "existential."

The difference becomes clear in the twofold meaning the word "know" has in the Bible. It signifies both knowing the truth and giving oneself in love. It is rather strange for us to find in the Bible not only this sentence: "Adam *knew* Eve his wife, and she conceived" (Gen. 4:1), but also this statement: "If any one imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. But if one loves God, one is *known* by him" (I Cor. 8:2-3).

The prophet Jeremiah writes of the coming day of salvation, "No longer shall each man teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will

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forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more' " (Jer. 31:34). And the prophet Amos says in his sermon on the doom of Israel, "Hear this word that the Lord has spoken against you, O people of Israel, against the whole family which I brought up out of the land of Egypt: 'You only have I known . . . ; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities' " (Amos 3:1-2).

Passionately the Bible assails the claim of those who assert that they know something about God apart from personal surrender: "He who says 'I know him' but disobeys his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him; but whoever keeps his word, in him truly love for God is perfected. By this we may be sure that we are in him: he who says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked. . . . God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him" (I John 2:4-6; 4:16).

God Incomprehensible Because He Is God

All these statements from the Bible make it clear that in the Bible's view one can find God only as one finds a "thou."

If we lose the human being as soon as we make an object of him, how much more must we lose God when we refuse him the respect for the ultimate mystery of personality with which we approach every human being!

Here lies the real difficulty of our search for God—that God is incomprehensible to us in so far as he is really God. We human beings are not *only* made in the image of God, not *only* men in the highest sense of the term; we are also related to the animal. We can be comprehended through the senses; we can be known scientifically. In other words, it is possible to make objects of us. Thus one can ascertain objectively that such and such a man exists, that he possesses certain qualities and does certain things. One can observe him and ascertain whether the letter he has written to us was actually written by him, whether

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a word that has been spoken actually comes from his mouth.

None of this can be done with God, if he is really Lord in the full sense of the word. You can't "prove" anything about him, as you would prove something about a man; for as soon as we attempt to do this, we strip him of his godhood and make him into a man and, what is more, not even a man whom we honor in love as a man, but one whom we merely utilize and make the object of our investigation.

Where Does God Speak?

Here again we reach the limit of our ability. We have learned that we can know God only in so far as he knows us, which means "in so far as he gives himself to us in love." We have learned that we can grasp this love, and thus the divine "Thou" himself, only as we love him in return. But how can we tell whether we are really grasped when the Ungraspable grasps us? We have learned that God cannot be grasped by seeing, by objective observation, but only by hearing him and belonging to him. How can we be sure that it is God who is speaking when somebody speaks in the name of God? Is not all speech human speech? Can human speech ever reveal to us the inmost being of God, his mystery, or even give us any sure knowledge that he exists? The church declares that in its services God's Word is preached, which is drawn from the Word of God, the Bible. Can this assertion that the Bible, and therefore the preaching of the minister, *is* the Word of God still be maintained today? This brings us up against another question, the answer to which is freighted with misunderstanding. We must dispose of this question first, if we are to get any light on the way to know God.

The Book About God

A thick layer of dust lies on the Bible, and right from the start this prevents many people from picking it up. If they had never read this book before, they would find it interesting, in fact, in many places exciting and in some places profoundly moving. But from their childhood they know that linked up with this book there is a unique claim of holiness and divinity that either depresses them or seems to them to be unfounded.

But the fact is that the Bible is the most important document of the history which informs us about the beginnings and the content of that faith which has determined the whole intellectual climate of our Western world. It simply cannot be ignored. The question whether and to what extent the Bible still gives us an answer to our question about true knowledge of God cannot be brushed aside as insignificant by any serious person. What are we to think of this most widely circulated and much misused book?

Human Writers, Children of Their Times

Anybody who approaches the Bible with an unbiased mind knows that it is not a book that fell from heaven. It is a book written by human hands.

The Bible was written in the thought forms of a particular time. The men who wrote it were confined to the ancient conception of the universe, according to which the earth was the center of the world around which the sun revolved in the vault of heaven. This and other scientific conceptions of the age in which the Bible was written have in the course of time proved to be human and transitory.

Large parts of the Bible are accounts of historical events.

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These events were experienced by men, stored in human memories, retold by men, and written down by men. The abilities of these men were not of divine perfection. None of the biblical writers makes this claim concerning his work. There are different accounts of many of the events in the Bible and they differ from one another in many details. It is clear that these differences were brought about by the difference in human ability to observe and remember.

In one part of the Bible, the so-called Pentateuch, various accounts are woven together. This sometimes resulted in certain discrepancies, particularly at the points where they were joined together. A popular example, which was formerly used very frequently in the propaganda of the freethinkers, is the question of where Cain, the son of Adam, got his wife. Her existence is unexplainable on the basis of the preceding chapters (Gen. 4:17).

In the New Testament the four Gospel accounts are not interwoven. They are placed beside one another as separate books, even though they are particularly dependent upon one another. The ancient church started with the correct assumption that the circumstance that there are a number of accounts of the same event, even though they may differ in details, does not call in question the reliability of the whole record, but on the contrary enhances it. In any case, when it did this it was taking into account the human imperfection of these reports.

A number of biblical narratives, like the Book of Job, for example, are not intended to be historical reports; their purpose is, rather, to drive home to the reader in poetic, narrative form certain experiences of faith or even theological insights of the narrator. There are other parts of the Bible in which the purpose of the author is not immediately apparent, and here we must inquire whether the narrator wished to set forth an historical happening or a parabolical story. Thus, for example,

there has been much controversy over the literary character of the Book of Jonah.

The historical background of all parts of the Bible is therefore not established. There are even passages in the Bible in which it is clear that the biblical writers diluted the purity of the biblical faith in God with pagan ideas and customs and mixed the passion of their despair even in their prayers (e.g., Psalm 137).

Finally, we do not possess the original author's manuscript of a single book of the Bible. Even the oldest manuscripts of the Bible are copies that differ from one another in many small details. This is the case especially in passages more difficult to understand, where the copyists attempted to make the text more intelligible. It is true that the comparative study of languages, which is a part of biblical scholarship, has in most cases restored the original text with considerable certainty; but we do not have a perfect reproduction of the biblical writings.

Dictated by the Holy Spirit?

These facts make it clear that the doctrine of the so-called verbal inspiration of the Holy Scriptures does not accord with reality. This doctrine asserts that the Bible is the Word of God in the sense that God himself dictated the text of the biblical writings and eliminated all human faults and errors. Even though this doctrine of inspiration contradicts the view which the biblical writers themselves had of their own writings, it has repeatedly been championed, even within the church.

But this doctrine not only contradicts the biblical facts; it is also at variance with the spirit of the Christian faith. One of the fundamental convictions of Christianity is that God, although he is omnipotent, does not eliminate the human being, does not bypass man's personality and destroy his independence by turning him into a will-less instrument of his sovereign will. The Christian faith lives in the conviction that God acts

in history through men who are imperfect and sinful but yet men who have been led to faith by the Spirit of God. Thus it is also not the teaching of the Christian church that the work of the Holy Spirit extinguishes all human characteristics and imperfections, but rather that, as Luther's Catechism says, he "calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies" us men and preserves us "in union with Christ in the one true faith." In the Christian view the revelation of God in this world does not appear in a collection of timeless divine communications and decrees, which man can then utilize as a "God between the covers of a book," exploit like an infallible medicine cabinet, or consult section by section like an eternally valid statute book. No, God reveals himself in the history of living men, and only he who meets this history as a living man can recognize in and behind this human history the history of the divine revelation.

The Bible in the Mausoleum of Its Interpreters

The doctrine of verbal inspiration has had disastrous consequences in the Christian church. Above all, it has jeopardized the meaning and importance of the Holy Scriptures for the faith and life of the church. Since many of the discrepancies in the Bible were, quite naturally, familiar to the advocates of this doctrine, they got around the difficulty by employing the so-called allegorical interpretation of the Scriptures. Using this method, they sought for a secret, supposedly "spiritual" meaning behind the actual meaning of the words, even where this meaning was not at all intended by the writers themselves. The consequence was that the interpreters of the Bible did not feel that they were bound to the actual meaning of the writings, but simply read into them what they were trying to prove at the time. Thus it is true that, ostensibly, great reverence was paid to the Bible. It was placed upon silken altar covers and revered as a divine book. But in reality, precisely through this ostensible honor that was given to it, it was often deprived of its real

effect and importance. This allegorical interpretation, which was indispensable to the doctrine of verbal inspiration, did not subject itself humbly to the word of the Holy Scriptures, as it imagined. It buried the Bible in a nimbus of divinity and more and more it stamped upon it the mind of its interpreters.

Therefore, in the final analysis, only when the human side of the Bible is faced and taken seriously can the Bible also make its divine meaning effectual. But how are we to perceive the divine meaning in this human form? Perhaps an illustration may help us to find an answer to this question.

The Bible, a Human Rendering of the Word of God

Occasionally over the radio we hear some important speech or communication which is of decisive importance for the destiny of our country or for our personal life. We are not hearing the speaker talk directly to us, and the transmission of his words is seldom so perfect that we cannot tell the difference between this and an address made to us directly; perhaps the receiver is not free of static or properly adjusted, so that all kinds of other voices keep interfering. There may be atmospheric disturbances that impair the clarity of reception. Under such conditions there may be radio listeners who would prefer not to listen at all. But there are some situations in which all this makes little difference to us. Then only one thing seems important to us, and that is to learn in one way or another what this fateful communication has to say to us. The stronger this desire is, the more will we forget the disturbances as we listen.

So it is with those who seriously want to hear in the Bible the words that promise to give them a message about the meaning, the destiny, and the purpose of their life. They will not be much troubled when scholars point out that there are many breaks and faults in the transmission of the divine speech and action. The only important thing for them will be the passion-

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ate desire to learn whether it is God who is speaking here and what he is saying.

In this illustration we have described the first conclusion we must arrive at when we ask the question as to how far the Bible is the Word of God according to the teaching of the church. One who prefers to express himself very precisely might perhaps say that the Bible is not God's immediate Word, but rather a human rendering of it; men like Isaiah and Jeremiah reproduce in human words what God has revealed to them. Historical writers give an account of the events and effects produced by the divine Word in individual men and a whole nation. The evangelists, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, give an account of the Word of God which they had "seen and heard" (I John 1:1) in Jesus Christ, whom they called the "Word of God made flesh." Letter writers in the time of the apostles set down in writing the Word of God which they drew from their encounter with Christ and which, in their preaching, became the Word of God to the people of their time.

Therefore, according to the Christian view, the Bible is a human reproduction of divine revelation, imperfect, as is everything human, and yet, despite this imperfection, widely recognized in human hearts as the Word through which God makes known his will to men, shows them his way, and rescues their souls from a thousand fears.

We Understand Only Human Speech

We see therefore that to have established that there are human elements in the Bible is not sufficient to justify doubt of the church's doctrine of the Word of God. These human deficiencies of the Bible will be a stumbling block to faith at most for those who approach the Bible with a preconceived opinion, that is to say, the opinion that it can be the Word of God only if it is a direct, immediate Word of God, which, naturally, would then have to be as faultless as the omniscience

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of God himself. The question is, however, whether we could even understand such a Word of God. The fact is that the only speech we can understand is human speech.

When we want to make something clear to children we must adapt ourselves to the child's way of thinking of things; otherwise we talk over their heads. So God speaks to men in the concepts and the language of their time. This does not mean that, as children grow, their concepts do not become clarified and that their world of ideas does not grow. Even in the Bible itself a purification of ideas about God, a growth in the world of religious concepts, and varying degrees of culture among the writers can be noted. But all of them were deeply imbued with the conviction that, no matter how great the growth of scientific knowledge or personal experience, before God and his Word we always remain children, who rather stammer than speak the eternal and unchanging Word of God in the language of our age.

The apostle Paul himself says that our earthly words and conceptions of God are only a dim and indistinct representation of the divine reality, which he hopes to see with full clarity in eternity. Thus he says: "Now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood" (I Cor. 13:12).

God speaks when he speaks to us through the Bible or through other human words, and hence through imperfect human means of communication. But he who is really in earnest about the truth about himself and God really hears God himself speaking to him through these means.

The Question of Pilate: "What Is Truth?"

When Christ spoke to Pilate about his eternal kingship, he spoke these simple words to this Roman who considered himself far above him: "I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth.

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Every one who is of the truth hears my voice' " (John 18:37). What Jesus was saying was that not everybody hears the voice of truth, the Word of God, when it is spoken. Only those who are of the truth, only those who are really concerned about it, really devoted to hearing it, actually hear it. Pilate obviously was not so concerned. At any rate he was not concerned about it in any ultimate, deep sense. For him this Jesus was only an interesting case which he was obliged to investigate. Moreover, his attention was concentrated primarily upon how he could wriggle out of this affair in a politically shrewd way without coming into conflict with the influential Jews. His inward ear was stopped by the fear of men. Therefore the voices of the screaming Jews outside and the voice of his reason, which was offended by the miserable outward figure of Jesus, were so loud that the voice of God, which was calling upon him to show the courage of a just judge, indeed, to bow down before this divine majesty, was drowned out, but perhaps not completely. The divine voice that was seeking to break through was still strong enough to make him uneasy.

And so even the most critical readers of the Bible can seldom elude its influence altogether. But this voice usually loses its compelling and therefore convincing power as long as it is drowned out by the noise of busyness and the self-assured voices of men who have not yet realized to the depths how badly they need God.

What does it mean, then, according to Jesus, to be "of the truth"? Jesus was doubtless thinking in the quite simple sense of a person who hears the truth and does it. He enunciated this in the words, " 'If any man's will is to do his will, he shall know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own authority' " (John 7:17).

Hearing and Heeding

Thus it cannot be a matter of our first studying God or his

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Word merely as neutral observers and then being able to consider whether we are willing to draw the consequences from the knowledge we have thus gained. The ears to hear God are opened only to him who takes his stand and faces with his whole being the One who is here putting his claim upon him.

What does it mean to "face the Word of God"? A simple example may illustrate it. When we make a trip to the mountains and step off the train, say, at Garmisch-Partenkirchen, we probably ask a native who is familiar with the region, "Where is the Zugspitze?" But it may be a cloudy day and the native points in a certain direction in which no more is to be seen than any other direction. Nevertheless, if we have any confidence in our informant, we go in the direction he has indicated as long as we can see a path ahead of us. Then as we walk we will learn more and more clearly whether the informant has spoken the truth or not.

This is the only answer we can give to the person who is seeking in the Bible certainty concerning the reality of God and the truth of his Word. We cannot seize God and examine him. If we were to try to prove God we should make his greatness ridiculous. Nor can we blow away the mist behind which his majesty is hidden from the prying eyes of man, who is hungry for knowledge but sinful. We can only say: "Here is a way. Look at what is said here, and if something about it seems right and clear to you, then start walking this way. Don't just sit there sulking in the waiting room of doubt until everything becomes perfectly clear. Go, at whatever cost. Sometimes it costs a great deal. It is also something of a venture to proceed on a path the end of which you cannot see. But first walk that part of it which you know is right and, if you do not neglect to keep on listening attentively, when you have traveled the stretch you know, then presently through the mist of uncertainty a further stretch will be discernible. Walk that stretch too. And if you keep on step by step, the time will come when the

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mists will disappear and the sun itself will light and warm you. The Center of the Bible, Jesus Christ, will stand before you and be the 'Light of light,' as the Nicene Creed puts it."

We shall have to say more later concerning this "Center of the Scriptures," Christ. Here our concern has been only to make clear what the Word of God, the Bible, means for our knowledge of God and how through it we can hear God's word and walk the way of faith, despite every critical consideration of its human aspects.

It is the way the men of the Bible themselves traveled. It is the way of God's history, God's actual encounter, with men. It must be traveled in the history of real life; it cannot be thought out in the study and measured out on a map. A man must walk this road himself, venturing his own life; and all this because God is a real God, not merely the concept of a God. It cannot be otherwise, because God is the Lord.

But what do we mean when we say, "God is the Lord"? Though this is something we can fully understand only in faith, we shall try to think through what is meant by this statement; for not only doing and not only hearing, but also reasoned understanding is part of what it means to walk the way we men must go.

Knowing God by Name

"If we are to believe in God we must still have some idea of him. After all, you can't really believe in somebody you have never seen, somebody who is only a name, somebody you can't even imagine." This is the way a lot of people think. They think they must have, as they say, a personal conception of God if they are going to believe. In reality, however, they drag along some childish ideas about God which they believe are indispensable if they are to profess a Christian faith in God. What do we really mean by a personal God?

The Problem of the Idea of God

There is in the Bible a remarkable story in which it is reported that God made known the secret of his name to Moses. It is the story in which Moses, after he was obliged to flee into the wilderness on account of a rebellion against the enslavement of his people, suddenly heard God calling to him from out of a mysterious fire. He received the command to venture what seemed hopelessly ridiculous and to confront Pharaoh to his face with the demands of God. Moses was ready to make this venture. But when he began to think about this bold mission he encountered a difficulty: Would the people follow him into the wilderness even if Pharaoh should set them free? Would they not ask, "What kind of God is this at whose command we are expected to give up our ultimate security, our dwellings, our jobs, our livelihood for the sake of a great, but very nebulous, promise"?

Thus, in the very midst of his shattering encounter with God, Moses' critical judgment told him that an attempt to liberate

his people would founder on this people's own doubt. For if he was to bring the children of Israel to rouse themselves and leave the house of bondage, he should at least be able to tell them what kind of God this was at whose word they should dare the road into the desert. Hitherto they had had some bad experiences with the "God of their fathers." In their opinion he had not troubled himself one bit over all the sufferings they had undergone in slavery. Moses therefore had to convince these skeptical people of God's real nature. The children of Israel had to have something they could get hold of as far as God was concerned. God had to make it possible for them to get a right conception of him if ever he were to succeed once more in rousing the confidence of faith in these people after their many disappointing experiences.

This is the way in which the question Moses addressed to God is to be understood: "If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" (Exod. 3:13).

The Name of God But Not an Idea of God

In the answer that Moses received in that hour the Bible describes the mystery of God's name and at the same time the reason why man, of himself, cannot grasp this mystery. The story goes on to say: "God said to Moses, 'I AM WHO I AM.' And he said, 'Say this to the people of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.' " God also said to Moses, 'Say this to the people of Israel, "The Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you": this is my name for ever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations.' "

Thus, according to this story, God gave himself two names. First the name "I am." The word that is in the original Hebrew text may also be translated "I AM WHAT I AM" or "I

WILL BE WHAT I WILL BE." The second name God gave himself is simply "the Lord."

The meaning of the story is that God did indeed present himself to the children of Israel by making known to them his name, but that in the very act of doing so he refused to give them what is called a concept of God. God's name is "I am what I am." God's name is "the Lord." Thus the mystery of his being consists in the fact that he does indeed exist, but that he does not subject himself to our observation and our prying thought. In other words, the noteworthy fact is that, though he meets us, he still does not become our object, but always remains the sovereign "I," who can be known only as man becomes *his* object, namely, the object of his love.

Childish Conceptions of God

When the Bible speaks of the revelation of God's name, it is professing faith in the personal God. But this faith differs fundamentally from the conceptions that men generally devise concerning a personal God.

When we were children we all had some kind of conception of the "loving God." Frequently it was connected with some picture in which God was represented as a kindly old man with a long beard. As we grew older we began to realize that God must be thought of in terms infinitely greater and loftier than our childish conceptions; he could no longer be small and finite, like a large man who walks about on earth. Perhaps we also learned that God is a Spirit. But then our image of God began to evaporate into something ghostly. In any case, something like this happened to Ernst Haeckel, the author of *The Riddle of the Universe*, who was well known around the beginning of the century. He believed that the Christian image of God was the nebulous form of a human person transformed into gigantic proportions. He therefore derisively called the God of the Bible a "gaseous vertebrate."

The Personality and the Omnipresence of God

Such superstitious conceptions of God become impossible as soon as one begins, with the Christian church, to believe in the omnipresence of God. A spirit (in the sense of a ghost) cannot be everywhere at once, no matter how large it may be. It is always localized somewhere—perhaps in heaven. But the Bible teaches concerning heaven, " 'Heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain thee [God]' " (I Kings 8:27). And Paul the apostle teaches concerning God, " 'He is not far from each one of us, for "in him we live and move and have our being" ' " (Acts 17:27-28).

Nor did the God of the Bible create the world, as an engineer would build a machine, and then withdraw from it to some far-off region. This was the belief of deism in the age of rationalism. God is present as the motive power in all the world and the farthest stars as well as in every tree, and yet he is not, as was the belief of pantheism (which quite rightly sought God in everything), merely a force or a principle which was at work in all things in an impersonal way. For the men of the Bible God is not a "thing," an "it," but an "I"; not merely a force, but its author and governor, the Spirit. Anybody who speaks of the divine instead of God is indeed calling God lordly, but not the Lord.

But to be the Lord is the very nature and being of God. The Bible does not call God a "personal" God. The word "person" was applied to God much later by the theologians (cf. Chapter XVII). The Bible expresses what we mean by the term "personal God" in a way that is less open to misunderstanding. It says, "God is Spirit" or "He is the Lord."

In our consideration of the mystery of the human personality we have already seen that, though this mystery is not something that can be grasped objectively, it is painfully felt when it is trampled underfoot, when it is ignored and forgotten.

It is ignored whenever we think that as soon as we have assessed a man's mental and physical attributes we have fathomed his whole being.

It is obvious that we must look for a similar mystery of personality when we approach God. It is the mystery of the dominion of the world, the mystery of a conscious, responsible, creative, and autonomous person. And it is by way of this mystery that there exists a unique relationship of being between man and God.

The first chapters of the Bible speak of this relationship of being between God and man when they say, "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him" (Gen. 1:27). And the same is meant in the other pertinent passage, "God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being" (Gen. 2:7). Man, closely as he is otherwise related to the animal, possesses something that makes him fundamentally different from the animal. He possesses the ability to act creatively and responsibly. A man acts, not merely in response to an instinctual urge, like an animal. He can survey his actions, make conscious decisions, and calculate their effect beforehand. He is therefore able, for example, by following the divine laws of nature to create the organism of a machine or even that of mechanical man. But, above all, as a self-conscious being man is capable of hearing God's address, "Thou shalt . . ." And because God so addresses him, man discovers that he can act creatively in this world and that he is responsible for the good and evil of his action.

The Person of God and the Image of God

Thus in God's intention man was meant to become a personal being, capable of exercising dominion over the world and over himself. The Bible expresses this in its description of God's will to create: "Let us make man in our image,

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after our likeness; and *let them have dominion* over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth' " (Gen. 1:26).

It is the ability to exercise responsible dominion, and not the psychophysical or body-mind structure which man very largely shares with the animal, that prompts the Bible to call man an image of God. God is the Creator Spirit and for this very reason he is unimaginable. For even though man as a creative, responsible personality was intended by God's will to be an image of God, we still cannot portray God by drawing an image of a man. What makes man a man cannot be expressed in pictures; it can hardly be done by the use of concepts. In the true sense one can only live and experience what makes man a man as this confirms and verifies itself. As a man takes his personal responsibility seriously he takes himself seriously. If he is a servant to his urges and desires, a slave to men, merely driftwood in the stream of external influences, he is not taking himself seriously. He loses his "self," his "I." He ceases to be a person. He becomes merely a fragment of "mass man." The dignity of man consists in the fact that God takes him with utter seriousness and that man knows in his conscience that his Creator takes him seriously.

Consequently, even though man is the image of God, we cannot turn around and derive from this a visualization or image of God; for in the last analysis we cannot even visualize our own human "self." We can do this only as we live out our existence.

God's Mystery Is His Freedom

The very existence of personality is a mystery. This is even more true of the person of God. He is always behind us, never before us to look at and examine. He is always the Subject

above us, never an object beneath us. As soon as we attempt to imagine or express this personal, divine "I" in conceptual terms, the inevitable result is an impersonal force. It is the nature of the creative "I" to be free, inconceivable, but effectual. He who tries to grasp it finds he has a handful of nothing.

So when the Bible and Christians are asked, "How do you picture God?" their answer is, "We think of him as a creative and personal Spirit." God is not merely a force. All impersonal forces move because they are moved, thrust because they are thrust, grow because they are generated and fed. They are creatures, not the Creator. They are objects, not the Subject. They are not free, but bound by their own nature. But God is free; he is the Lord. He cannot be made into an object. He is not nature, but the creative, personal Spirit who controls nature.

Christians conceive of God as such a Spirit, who is free, beyond every attempt of man to make an object of him. And because they so conceive of him, they do not conceive of him at all, in so far as God eludes all human concepts and ideas. He is found only by him whose "I" meets his "Thou" in the free surrender of love.

This is the meaning of the name by which God makes himself known to man. The man who has grasped this mystery of the divine name, not merely in thought but in his being, or, better, whose heart has been grasped by it, that man is truly "a man." He understands what it means to believe in God. But this is not a matter of keen thinking or scholarly observation. It is a matter of life or rather of grace.

But this brings us right back again to terms and concepts which may still be strange and unintelligible to us. They will not become intelligible to us until we have pushed farther on to the center of the Christian faith. However, before we tackle them we must discuss several questions that trip up many a person on the way to faith, especially today, and seem to make faith in a personal God impossible for them.

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Even a generation ago it was an unwritten law that, if a person wished to be considered educated, he must be above believing in miracles. But since modern atomic physics has shaken our belief in the mechanical operation of the law of causality in certain areas of cosmic events, belief in miracles has again become respectable. It would be a bad thing, however, if this were to prompt us to lose our critical standards with respect to all kinds of belief in miracle. This would expose us to every variety of mania for miracles and superstition. We must therefore be concerned with the question whether there are scientific and also religious criteria by which we can distinguish between fact and legend, faith and superstition. What particularly interests us here is the question of what the Christian faith expects and does not expect from God’s miraculous power. Anybody who knows the Bible knows that Jesus and the Old Testament prophets explain both the mania for miracles on the one hand and axiomatic rejection of miracles on the other as having the same root, namely, unbelief. Hence it may well be that the Christian faith actually occupies a third position in this question of the scientific possibility or impossibility of miracles, which is about equally remote from the modern defenders and the modern deniers of miracle. This is what we shall think about in this chapter.

The Denial of Miracle Is a Relapse Into Paganism

A faith that recognizes no miracles is not a genuine faith, in any case, not a Christian faith. At the very center of the Christian faith stands the confession of God’s sovereignty, free-

dom, and love. The person who simply denies miracle out of hand recognizes that there are a great many forces and laws to which man is subject, but he denies the Mind and the Will that established them and governs them. Then man is the only one who is in a position to make these forces and laws the object of his investigation, manipulation, and increasing control.

This is a relapse into paganism; for the essence of paganism consists precisely in man's imagining that he can discern the ultimate mysteries of cosmic events, like an astrologer, and subdue them and make them amenable to his will, like an animal trainer.

Such a relapse has in fact occurred in broad areas of the Western world under the influence of the mechanistic world view which dominated science around the turn of the century. The scientists were obsessed with the obligation to be absolutely objective, and this misled them into thinking that they must simply deny out of hand all subjects that were not disposed to become objects. Consequently, for this era the realm of freedom had no existence at all so far as science was concerned, at least not outside the sphere of the human. The result was that for this era belief in miracles was something that belonged to a prescientific epoch, which for educated, thinking people had long since been outgrown. In the meantime, however, we have outgrown this scientific era, which Viktor von Weizsäcker has characterized as the age of superstitious belief in science. Modern atomic physics owes its existence to the fact that it has overcome this superstitious belief in the objective rule of natural law in everything that happens.

Not only in the field of natural science, but also in the humanistic sciences, especially political science, it was recognized that at their foundation there is a faith that eludes every attempt at objective demonstration. A mechanistic view of the world leads inevitably to a mechanistic view of the state. Science's denial of freedom resulted in an actual loss of freedom.

In the long run man cannot maintain belief in his own freedom when he denies belief in the freedom of God. Therefore faith in the miracles of God is inseparably bound up with the intellectual foundations of our Western view of man and society. Faith in the miracles of God, which means faith in God's freedom, is the intellectual foundation of democracy.

Mania for Miracles Is Also Pagan

A relapse into paganism is apparent, however, not only among those who simply deny belief in miracles altogether, but also in certain forms of belief in miracles. This perversion of faith in miracles usually precedes the dissolution of that faith. It is a perversion of faith to believe that miracles are objectively demonstrable interruptions of the natural order and that the marvelousness of an event increases to the degree that it is impossible to explain it by natural processes. According to this view, the more extraordinary, the more contrary to nature an event is, the more it can be viewed as a miracle, indeed, a proof of divine intervention. From this perverted, non-Christian belief in miracles then comes the tendency to indulge in minute descriptions of the marvelous details of a miracle and to use this to prove its divine origin. This applies to many of the miracle stories in the medieval legends of the saints.

There can, of course, be no question that faith in miracles requires the conviction that there are occurrences in the world which are not explainable by natural law and that God in his sovereignty can and actually has intervened in the course of events. But just because God is absolutely free and sovereign in his action, what he does cannot be objectively grasped and proved. This is very clearly stated in the Old Testament as well as the New Testament.

In the Old Testament there is the story of Moses' wish to see the face of God. Moses wanted to see God at work directly (Exod. 33:18). Even to a Moses this was refused. True, he

was promised that God would allow all his goodness to pass before him and proclaim his name before him; but God himself and his action he did not see. Man can see God only from behind as he passes by.

Similarly in the New Testament, Jesus replied to the Jews who demanded a sign. They wanted him to prove outwardly and visibly by an act that would break through the normal order of nature that he was the plenipotentiary of God. Jesus repudiated this demand just as sharply as he did the same kind of suggestion made by Satan in the temptation story (Matt. 4:6).

Miracles as Proof Are Self-Contradictory

Man is debarred from tracking down with his rational scrutiny God's personal interventions in history and determining their divine origin. Hence every attempt to prove that a miracle is a miracle of God is disallowed. At best the attempt never gets any farther than the conclusion that for the time being a particular event is unexplainable. Whether it may turn out to be explainable in the future when science has made further progress is a question which on principle can never be answered, because God's freedom will never permit man to make an object of God himself. Equally futile, however, is the conclusion that a particular event is not a miracle because it evidences a natural course of events. For the Christian it is completely irrelevant whether or not a physician proves that his sudden turn for the better can be explained by medical processes. This has no influence whatsoever upon his experience of answer to prayer, upon his faith that in this instance God has dealt with him in his goodness. And rightly so. Nor do our human actions nullify the course of natural law in any happening. And yet we are convinced that something else besides natural events are at work when a Person intervenes conscientiously or carelessly in our lives. Every person who feels the sting of guilt in his conscience, everyone who is touched by the love

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of another is coming in contact with the miracle of human freedom. None of this interrupts the order of natural law; on the contrary, it makes use of it as a prerequisite in order to be able to act deliberately and therefore consciously. The mystery of personality is always hidden behind the external events, whether it is bound to the laws of nature, as it is with man, or whether it is above natural law, as it is with God.

Biblical Faith in Miracles

The faith in miracles which we find in the Bible therefore cuts right across the line that divides events that are explainable by natural law. For the men of the Bible the inviolable constancy of the course of nature is a sign of God's faithfulness, which thereby provides for man the foundation of his existence and thus also the basis of his freedom (Gen. 8: 21-22). For the men of the Bible an event gains religious interest, not because it is contrary to nature, but because it reveals God acting in grace or judgment. For the Bible " 'a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger' " (which in itself is in no way an extraordinary fact) is just as much a "sign" (Luke 2:12) as the feeding of the five thousand (John 6:26) or other miracles recorded as having been performed by Jesus (John 2:11; 4:54). And these miracles are, in turn, just as much a sign of God's mighty, gracious action as is the cross of Golgotha (Matt. 12:39-42), which to the Jews appeared to indicate the exact opposite, namely, that Jesus was helplessly abandoned by God. The Bible is convinced that the fact that the sign is a "sign" is not something that can be explained in natural terms or proved by natural perception. Even for Peter the fact that God was at work in Christ was not something that could be ascertained in a natural way, even though according to the accounts in the Bible he had seen the miracles of Jesus with his own eyes. Though Peter had lived through it all and seen with his own eyes, a special act of God was

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necessary if he was to be able to recognize in all this the working of God himself (Matt. 16:17).

Miracles Today

The same applies to a modern man's belief in miracles. There is no sense in trying to demonstrate and prove the validity of belief in God's miraculous power to a man who has lost his trust in the power of God and considers that he is merely the victim of blind forces. There is no use saying to him, "Look at the objective world of nature and history and see whether there have ever been any miracles that you can prove." Nor does it do any good whatsoever to tell him about miracles, even if you yourself have experienced them. At most you can say to him, "Act in such a way that a miracle can happen to you." And what that says is this: "Get down from your high horse where you make yourself the subject who is observing the divine action and God the object of your critical judgment. Let God be what he actually is, your Lord. Then one day you will see how you have become the object of his gracious action." In any case, the Bible declares that he most surely will find this to be true, for this is what it promises to such people: "'You will know that I am the Lord; those who wait for me shall not be put to shame'" (Isa. 49:23).

Anybody who has had personal experience with God in his own life knows that this is the way miracles happen. When we ourselves are the recipients of a miracle, in other words, when we ourselves are the object of God's action—say, in an hour of merciful escape in wartime or in days of marvelous recovery from an illness—we have the immediate impression in our conscience that here God is dealing directly with us. At moments like these it seems utterly banal to go on philosophizing about this fact or to try to dissect and analyze it in some way. It would strike us as being just as fatuous as to set up a sci-

entific test to determine the motives of one's beloved when we receive a gift from him.

But later on come the times when we think we must reflect upon what has happened. We take this miracle, which came to us like a ray of light from above, into our hands, as it were, and subject it to examination. But when we do this we find nothing but a few lines and traces of causes and effects, for "the station where the switches are set" lies in impenetrable darkness.

The Miracle-worker Is Above, Not Here Below

I shall try to make this whole matter clear by using an illustration. Some years ago my wife and I took a trip in the mountains. At first we followed the valley for a while and rested before we began the ascent. My wife set out first; I wanted to lie down for a while longer and enjoy the valley. About fifteen minutes later I followed her. Somehow I got off on the wrong trail and after some brisk and arduous climbing arrived at a prospect point from which I saw my wife standing at a bend in the trail about a hundred yards below me. She was waiting for me and was therefore looking steadily down into the valley with some concern about whether I was coming. I called out to her, but my voice was carried away by the wind. I waved to her, but she did not see because she was looking in the other direction. Finally I started down again and on the way dislodged a number of stones that tumbled past my wife into the valley below. This caused her to look up anxiously and somewhat puzzled, as she sought to avoid the falling stones. Then she saw me.

Something like this happens to people who seek God and wait for him. They keep looking down into the valley as though spellbound to see whether God will finally become visible there. In other words, they look as observers at the world, which is down below and subject to their thinking and understanding,

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to see whether they can find something there to prove that God is at work. The attempt fails. True, they find much that is inexplicable, but they have nothing to reply when somebody says that the time will come when this too will be explained by science.

Then perhaps something happens in the life of this person that may be called a landslide. It may be in the hail of bombs during a war, a severe illness, or any other experience that comes upon them unexpectedly. It makes them give up their spectator's point of view and flings them into the arena of real life. Without even thinking of what they are doing, they turn around and look up—to where the disaster or the good comes from. But now they look up not to observe it but to see how they can endure it and what will protect them. In that moment it may be that all of a sudden a person will know God in his life, not as one perceives some external event, but as one recognizes his Lord, or perhaps as an anxious lover waits for the voice of his beloved.

Many have had this experience. But the mistake they have made is that afterward they have tried to lay hands on this experience to determine whether they have really met God himself here or merely encountered some external, natural process. Thus they again become spectators. They turn their backs to the divine "Thou" and address themselves to external events. Is it any wonder, then, that his reality dissolves in their hands?

Miracles and Science

These considerations, however, are not meant to imply that scientific investigation of unexplainable events or even scientific study of the accounts of miracles in the past are prohibited. On the contrary, the door is left wide open for every kind of scientific investigation. Thus historical criticism may study the miracles of the Bible, their external details and how they were handed down to us, and it will find that the events behind the

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accounts are very different in their nature. In many cases the events there described can be explained "naturally" by means of present-day science. Many miracle stories will perhaps have to be viewed as parabolic stories, because originally this is what they were intended to be. Many of the stories will simply confront the scholar with an inexplicable mystery, before which, as a scientific scholar, he will have to be honest and lay down his arms without attempting to state whether these are historical events or something else. There is only one thing the scientific scholar dare not attempt, and that is to prove or to disprove that here God has intervened in the history of the world. For the scientist can only show us the chain of external events; he has no competence to prove or authenticate the activity or the efficacy of a personal Will in history. But for the same reason it is also absurd to attempt, by means of ecclesiastical apologetics, to make the miracles of the Bible appear plausible by explaining them. Nobody is ever helped to believe in God by directing his attention downward in a kind of inquisitive mania for explaining things. He will be helped only by turning his gaze upward in worship and prayer.

To the man who has experienced the love of God personally it is a matter of complete indifference whether men make the attempt to prove or to disprove that God intervenes in the events of this world. What concerns him far more is another question—the dark mystery of evil. The question of how God can operate in the face of the iron law of cause and effect that rules all things is not the one that makes the most trouble. But that, despite the sovereign, creative power of God, there should be other powerful spirits that work against him—this appears to be an utter contradiction. Some reflection upon this enigma of the "split" in the Will that rules the world will lead us still deeper into an understanding of God and man.

God's Omnipotence and Goodness Behind the Mystery of Evil

The man of this age of technics tends to judge everything from the point of view of whether it is technically perfect and faultless. Therefore it seems to him to be simply incomprehensible, indeed, a severe obstacle to faith, that there should be so many things in this world that do not function faultlessly at all. What disturbs him most of all is the fact that obviously God has not managed to keep undesirable, disturbing influences out of this world. Could he not have constructed a "foolproof" world, if he is really all-powerful and if he really loves his children?

The Unnaturalness of Evil

Many people try to solve the question of the mystery of evil with the help of scientific observations. They say: "Evil is the natural opponent of the good. This opposition—as the ancient Persians said long ago—is the real driving force of nature and world history. This struggle is simply a basic biological principle which is a part of the natural order, and it has its well-considered purpose in the total process of the world. Just as the animals fight with one another and eliminate the weak and unfit, so it is in the life of men and nations, since they too are subject to the great laws of nature."

It will not escape the notice of the careful observer that this explanation contains an error. In the animal world the element of struggle may perhaps have a salutary significance. It keeps the species sound and eliminates the sick and the select best are left. Therefore this kind of struggle is natural. But every-

body knows that wars produce an opposite kind of selection. The healthy and strong and those who are willing to sacrifice themselves are diminished, and the sick, the weak, and the craven have the chance of survival. This in itself indicates that there is something profoundly unnatural about wars. They are the consequences of evil. Looking at history, we cannot even say that the healthy and vigorous peoples have produced a stronger biological effect through wars—at any rate, not the militant peoples. Wars sap the marrow of nations.

Biological Explanations of Evil

It is true that competitive struggle constitutes a sound principle in human life too. The matching of strength, as is done in sports and also in business life, is a stimulus to maximum achievement and to this extent is a sound principle. Every sportsman knows, however, that there are moments in which evil enters into this competition, when selfishness, cheating, hatred, and raw violence drives out all the good in it. There is in human life the poison of evil, and wherever this poison is at work struggle and competition are not beneficial but rather destructive.

If we were to make the basic principle of life in the animal kingdom the fundamental law of a state—Hitler actually attempted to do this—and say “right is whatever prevails,” then it would soon be not the good but the evil, not the lions but the serpents, not the self-sacrificing spirits but the cold, calculating self-seekers who would prevail. Therefore in human society might must be held in check by right.

Animals are beyond good and evil. They live as their nature compels them to live. Therefore their struggles are healthy. But the Creator has given man freedom of personality and the capacity to hear God’s call, “Thou shalt . . .” If man closes his ears to this call, he opens them to evil, and evil is the power that poisons and destroys. Evil is to blame for the fact that

God's Omnipotence and Goodness Behind the Mystery of Evil the creations of the human spirit keep turning back upon man himself, that all the toil and endeavor of the human race are under a curse. It is not toil in itself, not the great technical achievements of man, not competition as such which is cursed. But evil, which is constantly impressing these achievements into its service, destroys their blessing, and the greater the accomplishments science and technics produce for the benefit of mankind, the greater is the power that is put into the hands of evil.

Aesthetic Interpretations

Besides the biological interpretation of wars and evil in the world we are constantly hearing an aesthetic interpretation. This interpretation says that life may be compared to a varicolored tapestry in which the bright and shining colors are given their best effect precisely because they are woven together with dark colors. It says to us: "How monotonous this life would be if there were no evil one, the 'spirit that is constantly denying' (Goethe)! By its very denial evil really shows us what life is, with its struggle and venture and song."

This viewpoint would mean that suffering and evil are the dark side of life but yet a side that is a necessary part of life, which, if need be, one "must love as one's lot" (Nietzsche). It is the dark aspects of life that bring out the strongest and most magnificent contrasts in the world's picture. But the man of today, who has experienced in his own lifetime the horrors of war, the abysmal baseness of humanity, and the ghastly destinies it produced, will hardly be comforted when he is told that he himself represents the somber colors on the palette of a God who takes pleasure in producing pictures that are rich in contrast. The man of today would certainly be obliged to curse that kind of God and endeavor to exterminate the worship of him.

Neither the biological nor the aesthetic answer to the mystery

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of evil can satisfy us. But this only makes more acute the question: "Why, then, did God permit evil at all, if he is really love and goodness himself?" "Is he himself evil," we sometimes dare to think, "if he has the power to prevent evil and yet permits it to go on?"

Freedom to Do Evil Made Possible by the Love of God

When we come to this point we feel that we are standing at the edge of an abyss into which our faith threatens to topple. Many have actually fallen into this abyss. There are depths in the testing of faith into which we dare not descend with only the weapons of reason to release those who are held captive by such onslaughts upon their trust. For there dwell specters and demons which can be subdued only by God's power and the power of strong love. But anybody who has ever emerged from such an abyss will know that it is a fact that there we are confronted not merely by the demonic enigma of evil but also the infinite ocean of goodness and the unspeakable grandeur of God, who scorns to impose his divine will upon the world like an Oriental potentate. Of course, this is a bold assertion, and we must examine its meaning very carefully. We shall try to approach it, again by means of a simple example from human life.

Some years ago as I was sitting in a park I observed a woman who was sitting on another bench. She was occupied with her four-year-old boy. Quite obviously she was putting him through some training exercises. First she dropped her handkerchief, and the boy had to pick it up. Then he was sent to fetch a flower and then a pebble. Every time the boy carried out her command the woman looked around at the other people sitting about to see whether they had noticed what a well-trained son she had. Prompt obedience to every command! I was a bit troubled by the whole performance and wondered how a boy trained in this way would act when he was eighteen years old.

God's Omnipotence and Goodness Behind the Mystery of Evil

I could only hope that probably the mother would then accept the role that the little son was now being forced to play; for the other possibility—that this training would succeed and a dependent puppet, a kind of trained human monkey would be sent out into life—seemed to me to be far worse.

This example makes it clear, it seems to me, that if the dignity of humanity is not to be choked, then the love of every educator must limit his power and progressively grant to children the freedom to make their own decisions. A teacher or parent will, of course, even use force to keep away from foolishness a child who is not yet able to discriminate. He will also try by word and act and praise and punishment to make clear to him the difference between good and evil. But if a child, as he grows in knowledge, is not granted the freedom to make his own decision and at least occasionally given the feeling that he is not being supervised at all, his rearing might better be called "breaking in" than "education." Training is different from education in that it will not accept the risk of granting freedom and responsibility and takes as its aim the inculcation of a mechanical, prompt compliance with commands.

God Remains the Master of Evil

The aim of genuine fatherly love is not to make the child a machine that functions without friction but a person with the full dignity of a human being, the freedom of human personality. This kind of fatherly love wants nothing but the unforced love of the child; for love exists only where there is also the freedom not to love. Good in the moral sense exists only where there is freedom to omit what is good, in other words, where there is freedom to do evil.

Therefore genuine love is always accompanied by a great risk. This is the love the Bible is talking about when it speaks of the love of God. The Bible is convinced that this love of God found its expression in God's work of creation, but chiefly

in the creation of the crown of creation, which is man. The significant thing is that, though this fatherly love of the Creator has all divine omnipotence at its command, this omnipotence is limited at the point where it grants man the freedom to be truly man. Not that this limitation upon God's omnipotence was forced upon him. God limits himself voluntarily, because he does not desire that dictatorial omnipotence that will not tolerate any other will but its own.

The God of the Bible is not only omnipotence; he is also love. And it is to this fact that God is a giving, creating love, a love that grants a royal freedom, a love to which the world, and especially man, owes its origin and existence. Obviously God would not consider it an honor if his subjects, who are his creatures, were merely to react like clockwork and sing their praises promptly on command. It was his glory to create a world that is apart from himself and that confronts him in genuine freedom and with its own will.

Even evil is permitted by God, though it is opposed to his will. God does not desire evil itself, as a painter desires the dark passages in his picture; God gives evil the opportunity to exist and develop only as he provides freedom for the good to do its work.

Evil in God's Plan of Salvation

This freedom which God has granted to the world and to men does not, of course, imply that God has ceased to be their Lord. The freedom that God gives does not produce a situation in which evil could ever actually and permanently escape the power of God. Nor can this ever mean that, because God has given the world its existence and the right to live in accordance with its own ordinances, he therefore is unable to intervene in the ordinances, to destroy them or to create them anew. He is the Lord of the world, even when it repudiates his will. But the omnipotence of God is so great that it is able to achieve its

God's Omnipotence and Goodness Behind the Mystery of Evil ultimate purpose, not merely by means of overwhelming force, but—what is far greater—by love.

In education we have learned that when a teacher applies force and breaks the will of a pupil simply by the use of compulsion this is always a sign of human weakness in the teacher. He doesn't know how to cope with the situation in any other way. The Bible is convinced that the omnipotence of God reveals itself most gloriously and accomplishes its will most clearly at the very point where it most radically renounces the exercise of its power—in the sacrificial love of the cross of Golgotha. We shall say more about this later.

Here it is sufficient to see that the scope which God grants to evil for a time is not inconsistent with the greatness of his omnipotence, but rather reveals its depth. His omnipotence is so great that in his generous love he is able to allow mankind complete freedom of decision without being concerned that he will ever lose his sovereignty. God's dominion over the world is so uncontested that he is able to maintain to the end his venture of man's freedom without ever a care that he will fail to achieve the ultimate goal of his purpose. God does not impose his will upon men and nations. He punishes them when they do evil and he suffers whole generations to feel the consequences of their sins. But the punishment is not so omnipresent that men are compelled, under the threat of this rod, to follow its counsel. Indeed, even when men band together against him and declare, "We do not want this man to reign over us" (Luke 19:14), God simply leaves them to their own devices. Then this is the judgment of God of which Paul spoke when he said, "Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity" (Rom. 1:24).

But, according to the Bible, even this judgment is not without the seeking love of God. On the contrary, in the darkness of judgment itself God seeks through the affliction of separation from God to bring men to see that their salvation is

grounded only in return to the love of God. The Bible is deeply permeated with the conviction that the zealous, wooing love of God is always at work, even in suffering and in judgment. For suffering and judgment are only a part of God's great plan of salvation. It is not a plan in which men are allowed, like puppets in a marionette theater, to play only the parts in the play assigned to them by God. The world's history is no mere play, but rather events that occur in deadly earnest. Thus, according to the prophet Isaiah, God says: " 'I knew that you would deal very treacherously, and that from birth you were called a rebel. For my name's sake I defer my anger, for the sake of my praise I restrain it for you, that I may not cut you off. Behold, I have refined you, but not like silver; I have tried you in the furnace of affliction. For my own sake, for my own sake, I do it, for how should my name be profaned? My glory I will not give to another. . . . O that you had hearkened to my commandments! Then your peace would have been like a river, and your righteousness like the waves of the sea. . . . There is no peace,' says the Lord, 'for the wicked' " (Isa. 48:8b-11, 18, 22).

The mystery of God's dominion over the world and all the riddles that seem so hard for us men to understand have their basis in the miracle of the divine Person, in the freedom of God that creatively bestows freedom and nevertheless retains its sovereignty, that permits evil to go to its ultimate limit and yet outstrips it with his love.

Evil in Person

So it is to be understood that even the satanic power, the devil of whom the Bible speaks, is permitted by God. The Bible believes that there exists not only evil in man but the evil one, an invisible tempter of man. This is bound up with its conviction that the divine will in all the fulness of its creativity brought forth other creatures beyond our dimensions of space

God's Omnipotence and Goodness Behind the Mystery of Evil and time and beyond all that we are able to imagine and perceive with our senses. Many of the writers of the Bible are of the conviction that such a realm of spirits, angels, and demons exists and that the beings of this realm too have been granted the gift of freedom, the gift of free and voluntary service of their Creator. It follows from this, then, that there is also in this realm a fall from God that began before this world came into being.

Death, "the Wages of Sin"

Many theologians think that we can see in Lucifer's fall from God the reason for the universal struggle that prevails in nature, the suffering and torment, and especially the power of death which are present in nature even beyond the domain of men. Many believe that this explains the fact that death certainly existed in the world of plants and animals before the existence of man and his fall into sin. Paul's statement that death is the wages of sin would thus apply to the whole cosmos and not only to men, who are called in a special way to have fellowship with God and therefore to everlasting life. Such considerations, however, bring us to a field of pious speculation for which there is no reliable foundation. The only thing that is certain is that for the men of the Bible the death of man is an expression of the fact that he still lacks full personal fellowship with the Creator of all life. And even for the believer this is promised only in a future life where there is no death and no sin. This will be discussed in more detail in the last part of this book.

God's Justice and the World's Suffering

The free, fatherly love of God bestows freedom of decision upon his noblest creatures. This is the reason why there can be things in this world which are opposed to the will of God. But after all, if God remains the Lord of the world, must he not be concerned about justice in the world? Even though evil and the punishment that follows it are in the world because God permits them, should it not be far more clear that this punishment is inflicted by the hand of a just Ruler of the world for the chastising and disciplining of men?

Ought not divine justice be more concerned that suffering, which is caused by evil, should above all strike those who have caused the suffering? Why is it that this is so seldom true in the world?

Why Do the Wicked Prosper?

Nowhere is the question of God's justice put with such staggering, relentless trenchancy as in the Bible itself. There we read in Psalm 73:

"But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled,
my steps had well nigh slipped.
For I was envious of the arrogant,
when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.
For they have no pangs;
their bodies are sound and sleek.
They are not in trouble as other men are;
they are not stricken like other men.

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Therefore pride is their necklace;
violence covers them as a garment.
Their eyes swell out with fatness,
their hearts overflow with follies.
They scoff and speak with malice;
loftily they threaten oppression.
They set their mouths against the heavens,
and their tongue struts through the earth.
Therefore the people turn and praise them;
and find no fault in them.
And they say, 'How can God know?
Is there knowledge in the Most High?'
Behold, these are the wicked;
always at ease, they increase in riches." (Ps. 73:2-12)

Is there an answer to these questions? But first a counter-question.

God's Hiddenness, the Safeguard of Man's Freedom

We reproach God for not punishing evil and rewarding good more conspicuously. But what would be the result if he were actually to do this, if he were to exercise justice in the world in such a way that we could prove it, in other words, if he immediately and demonstrably rewarded the good and punished the evil?

First one might suppose that then all men would promptly obey the will of God; except that they would not do it for love of God and their neighbor, but from pure calculation. They would be like children who are accompanied every step by a nursemaid and rewarded for every good deed and immediately punished every time they stray from the straight and narrow path. Would this not endanger—indeed, make impossible—the very thing that God wants, namely, the free decision of loving devotion that loves God and neighbor not for

payment but out of the gratitude of love, not out of greedy expediency but generous goodness? It is true that God is present everywhere, but according to our human understanding he must withdraw himself from the field of our calculations if there is to be any room for any free humanity deserving of the name. Many of the parables of Jesus point in this direction. In these parables God is compared with a landowner who withdraws into a far country and thus gives his servants the opportunity to prove themselves freely (Matt. 25:14-30).

God's Patience and Human Impatience

There is another, more serious consideration which is in order at this point when we are complaining of God's lack of justice. It will be well for us to reflect whether we ourselves would not be subject to God's judgment if suddenly it were to descend and judge us by the standard of justice. The ancient Jews too were always clamoring for the day of judgment because their lot was harder than that of the heathen. But their prophets warned them strongly against crying out for the judgment day of the Lord (Amos 5:18). This crying out for the justice of God is almost always the fruit of the self-righteousness of humans who are impatient with the longsuffering of God and completely overlook the fact that without this longsuffering they could hardly exist. Of course, only those whose conscience has already been stabbed awake by the holiness of God can understand this.

Naturally, it would be possible to go farther here in our speculations and say that, if God is all-powerful, it should be possible to create free persons without at the same time allowing evil to exist. One might also ask whether God could not have put into man the kind of impulse and compulsion toward the good which would also have left him with freedom of decision. But these are futile questions. One might just as well ponder over the question whether the omnipotent God could

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not have arranged things so that freedom and unfreedom, yes and no, and four and five would be the same. We human beings cannot even conceive what God might have done otherwise.

God's Right to Be Unsearchable

We must be content to know what God has done and be thankful and satisfied that we are able to discern the reasons for his actions as far as is necessary to know his purposes in our own life.

Even the writer of Psalm 73, who was so tormented by the problem of injustice in the world, was obliged to confess with regard to wicked men's escape from punishment, "When I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task, until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I perceived their end" (Ps. 73:16-17).

Not all the riddles and problems of life are solved in this world. The lines of events run on beyond the iron curtain of death. Anybody who demands that God solve all the problems and enigmas for him before he himself is prepared to believe and trust in God is forgetting to take into account the fact that God is above him and that God is in control.

It is an unseemly demand for men to think that everything that happens in this world must justify itself before the bar of their moral judgment. This demand is tantamount to rebellion against the fatherly dominion of God.

Every parent or teacher will permit a child to explore the reason for his parental actions, but only to a certain degree. He must demand that the child be prepared to trust his fatherly guidance and obey even when his guidance is completely beyond the child's understanding.

Discipline in the School of God

God brings every man into his school, where he must learn the laws of the house of God. One of the examination questions

which is put to men in this school is this: "Do you trust God, even when you do not understand him?" This is the test question that man faces every time he is confronted by experiences in life which are hard and unexplainable, whenever he is led down paths whose ends are utterly dark and meaningless.

Many people respond to such test questions by quarreling with God and defying him. They think that God must be prepared to admit that they are right or at least to propitiate them with explanations. But the Bible pronounces a curse upon such arguing with God: "'Woe to him who strives with his Maker, an earthen vessel with the potter! Does the clay say to him who fashions it, 'What are you making?'" (Isa. 45:9).

It is the experience of all who believe in God that he can be unyieldingly hard against the kind of human arrogance that presumes to summon him before the bar of human judgment by arguing with him. But this resistance of God to human arrogance is at once an invitation to acknowledge the truth and to submit to him in faith and trust. But when this trusting submission to God occurs in a human life and a man surrenders fully, people are often given such wonderful experiences of the strengthening and providing love of God, even in the midst of suffering, that in the end they can do nothing but praise his fatherly faithfulness. That is why that chapter in Isaiah in which man's quarreling with God is so relentlessly resisted closes with these words: "'By myself I have sworn, from my mouth has gone forth in righteousness a word that shall not return: 'To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear.' Only in the Lord, it shall be said of me, are righteousness and strength; to him shall come and be ashamed, all who were incensed against him. In the Lord all the offspring of Israel shall triumph and glory'" (Isa. 45:23-25).

We have been given our human power of judgment and the Word of God that we might be able to distinguish between right and wrong, justice and injustice, in our own life.

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We reverse the very purpose of this gift when the use we make of it is to put God on trial before our human judgment. First we must subject ourselves to this judgment. Only then will we learn the earnestness of the right and discern the truth in this judgment.

The Dividing Wall of Sin

Who never ate with tears his bread,
 Who never through the troubled hours
 Weeping sat upon his bed
 He knows ye not, ye heavenly powers.
 Ye lead us into life amain
 Ye let the poor with guilt be weightied,
 And then ye give him o'er to pain,
 For guilt must all be compensated.

—Goethe

Man Freeing Himself by Denial of Guilt

"Doesn't the church talk too much about sin? After all, it's just too discouraging!" This is what a lot of people say, and experience seems to agree with them. It cannot be denied that the lives of many people gain in power at first when they cast aside moral inhibitions and compunctions. They feel a sense of liberation from the anxious prospect of sin and the menacing God of judgment. The defiant will grows wings for successful, perhaps even happy achievement.

There is a kind of temporary liberation from the depressing weight of sin which can occur not only in reconciliation through Christ, but in the very opposite of it—in defiant renunciation of any reconciliation and any relation with God whatsoever. Not infrequently we meet former Christians whose lives have been torn and divided and in this way have experienced a kind of conversion to godlessness or to some sort of substitute religion of human self-sovereignty. Young people too who in their Christian upbringing have been faced with the seriousness

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of God's commandments may often be tempted to feel like weaklings when they are confronted with the bubbling energy and lack of restraints and inhibitions shown by their non-Christian contemporaries. The drives in their blood clash with their moral constraints and the result may easily be a dividedness that is equally incapable of good or evil.

This circumstance is by no means unfamiliar to the Bible. When the Bible speaks of man's responsibility to God and of sin, its first concern is by no means that of contributing to the business which people would like to shove off on religion, namely, that of "building up people spiritually," which means giving them uplift and inspiration, providing them with spiritual energy.

At first the doctrine of sin can produce just the opposite. It may make a man cry out: "My body wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night thy [God's] hand was heavy upon me" (Ps. 32:3-4). The biblical doctrine of man is certainly not calculated to promote and build up a man's confidence in himself, but rather to shatter it.

But does the Bible shatter that confidence by a pessimistic doctrine or some theory that is unrealistic and alien to life? No, it shatters it by revealing the reality of our life; it declares that man is entangled in sin, that he is a member of a lost world.

Man Freeing Himself by Denial of Freedom

The same people who in the name of freedom protest against this Christian message of man's sinfulness often domesticate their conscience by denying that they have any freedom. They say, for example, that man is subject to the laws of biology like any other animal. He is subject to his urges and resistance to these urges only leads to inner tensions and distortions. Man's being is predetermined. The inherited structure he is born with and the influences of his environment are the deter-

mining factors in his life and he cannot escape them. Formulated in religious terms, this means that God put my nature and my urges in me; why, then, should he hold me accountable if they produce not only what is good but also some evil?

The strange and contradictory thing about man's attitude therefore consists in the fact that his first reaction is to respond defiantly and self-assertively to the Christian message by asserting his freedom. He declares that he is no more bound by God's commands than by the consciousness of his sinfulness. But then, after he has had a few experiences with this "freedom," he usually ends up justifying this defiant self-assertion by denying his own freedom.

The farther modern man gets away from the biblical revelation, the more his own guilt seems to him to be only a fate that has been imposed upon him by God, his own inherited structure, and his bad fellow men. At the same time, however, the guilt of his fellow men he still thinks of as real guilt that fills him with bitter hatred, and he demands that it be punished relentlessly. So man arrives at a strange form of self-righteousness which, despite all his efforts, includes his own self-condemnation. The Bible registers this fact in these words: "Therefore you have no excuse, O man, whoever you are, when you judge another; for in passing judgment upon him you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things" (Rom. 2:1).

The Witness of Conscience

The Bible builds an insurmountable dam against the defiant assertion of man's freedom and the fatalistic assertion of his unfreedom, and that dam is the witness of man's conscience. It starts out by completely ignoring the question of whether this conscience is always correctly instructed. In the original language of the New Testament, the Greek word for conscience is *syneidesis*, which means literally "one's own consciousness ap-

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pearing as a witness." This consciousness is bestowed also upon those who have learned little about God's commandments in their youth. They too usually know fairly well what is right and proper as far as others are concerned. It was in this sense that Paul said that the heathen too "show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or perhaps excuse them" (Rom. 2:15).

Jesus too is referring to this simple fact in his Golden Rule: " 'Whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them; for this is the law and the prophets' " (Matt. 7:12). In this commandment Jesus reminds us that in the moral demands man makes upon his fellow men he has an infallible judge and that, as soon as he abandons the position of philosophical spectatorship and enters the arena of real life, he cannot excuse himself before that judge.

Unfreedom as Judgment

It is true, of course, that a man can become such a slave to his sin that his individual acts may seem to him to have been committed by compulsion. Every individual moral or immoral act has a history that precedes it. But no person is innocent and without responsibility for this previous history, even though circumstances may have been partly responsible. Certain tracks are beaten in a road and as soon as the person gets back into them he slides along with uninhibited speed. The more worn the tracks, the more irresistible is the compulsion. Therefore the Bible says that sin is not only a transgression but that the compulsion to sin is actually a judgment of God (Rom. 1:21-25).

The man who has personally experienced the fact that he is incapable of doing good, that, for example, he simply does not have the strength to overcome a bad habit, is still not justified in denying his moral responsibility. Even the worst man has

in him something of the nobility of humanity, of personality, that moral responsibility which has been given to man by God. Man is not merely a piece of driftwood, driven hither and yon, a bit of impersonal, will-less nature. He was made responsible for his actions by his Creator. Therefore it is simply flight into falsehood when a man evades the question of his sinfulness.

This is by no means in contradiction to the Christian doctrine of original or inherited sin; for this teaching is in no sense based on the fatalistic view that all man's actions are predetermined and fixed by God. The doctrine of original sin simply declares that man, who is enmeshed in sin, involves himself further in it through all his efforts to free himself by his own strength. How are we to understand this doctrine?

Can Sin Be Inherited?

An inheritance is not a fault, an offense; it is something that happens to us, our lot, our destiny. The word "sin," however, refers to man's fault and guilt. The word "sin" addresses itself to a man's self, his person, his utterly personal responsibility. The "inheritance" puts him in a chain of affiliations which are beyond the freedom of the individual person. What is the real meaning of this contradictory term "inherited or original sin"?

The word "sin" is not primarily an expression of any kind of moral wickedness in a man. It deals with the man's relation to God. The term "inherited sin" expresses the fact that there is a disturbance of this relationship, not only in the individual person, but in the whole human race, though the individual is constantly confirming this disturbance by his own purposeful conduct and attitude.

In sin a man separates himself from God. The term "inherited sin" says that this separation does not occur for the first time in the individual human life, but that ever since the first fall of the human race it has been the destiny of every member of the race.

The Fall

The story of the fall is not merely a narrative of some isolated prehistorical event. It is *the* history of man; for the very name "Adam" means "man." The intention of the teller of the story was to communicate in the form of a story his knowledge of the human heart, which was based on faith in God, and in this way to interpret the tragic mystery of human guilt and lostness. Every human being is constantly acting toward God in the same way that Adam and Eve did. Surely this entanglement of mankind in sin had its beginning somewhere.

The central point of the story of the fall is not a woman's fondness for sweets or some other human foible, but rather that the relationship of trust between man and God has been broken. Man thinks that if he is not to lose out he must assume control of his own life and defend his own rights. Instead of trusting like a child the Father's faithfulness and goodness, he gives credence to the insinuation that God's commandments spring from God's selfish will to power, against which he must defend and assert himself. And so man becomes receptive to the devilish promise, " 'You will be like God, knowing good and evil' " (Gen. 3:5).

Original sin therefore consists in man's making himself independent of God, refusing to live by His goodness, indeed, putting himself in the place of God.

The Toxin of Distrust

We shall understand the nature of sin only if we remember that the relationship between God and man is an I-Thou relationship. It is a relationship between two persons, though they are two very different persons. The disturbance of this relationship through sin is like the guilty crises that occur in the love relationships of friends or married couples. The right relationship between two persons who love each other consists in their

living for each other in self-giving love and complete trust. The more unreserved and unconditional this devotion is, the deeper and more painful is the wound when suddenly one of them, and perhaps even the one who has been given the most, responds to this love with distrust. How deeply our hearts are wounded when a person to whom we have given our utmost devotion and love suddenly charges us with underhanded stinginess and accuses us of keeping the best for ourselves, saying that obviously he will have to look out for himself!

This is the attitude that man takes when, in the face of all the good things he receives from God without deserving them in any way whatsoever, he succumbs to a temptation and accuses God of self-interest (Gen. 3:5a). He says to himself: "I'd be a sucker if I arranged my life according to God's commandments. I must see whether I can't get farther without him."

The rift grows even deeper when two people who love each other begin to become calculating with each other instead of trustfully accepting what each has to give; when, for example, a husband, whose wife has given to him herself and all that she has, begins to check and recheck the household accounts to see if he can squeeze a bit more out of the situation.

This is what man does when, instead of trusting the goodness of God in childlike gratitude, he demands, as it were, an accounting of God to see whether he has properly established the ordinance of good and evil (Gen. 3:5b), whether he rules the world with justice, and whether it may not be more profitable to try his luck with the counsels of his own reason.

The final break in the relationship of two persons who love each other comes when one partner begins to believe the tempting suggestion that some other partner has more to offer him and thus carries out the break in fact. This breach occurs in every human life every time a man obeys the temptation that whispers that "the prince of this world" ultimately has more to offer than God.

The operation of original sin in a human life reaches its peak when a person who has been nurtured in the commandments of God nurses in his heart a secret envy of those who do what they please without any inhibitions and finally acts upon this secret envy and accommodates himself to the methods of the world. Is there any man in this world who can say that something like this has never happened in his life?

The Irreparable Breach

The dreadful thing about this breach in the relationship of trust is that the one who caused the breach is utterly incapable of healing it by any means at his disposal. This is what the doctrine of original sin is concerned to establish. It means to say that man by himself has not the remotest chance of restoring his broken relationship with God. Once he has abandoned the attitude of childlike gratefulness, his whole being moves in the wrong direction, not only when he does evil but even when in his own self-will he tries to do good, not only when he surrenders to the world but also when he seeks to know and find God by his own powers.

Again we may express this in terms of our metaphor: Once a person has degraded the personality of his partner who has given himself in love to an object that he can observe and which must produce advantages for him, the two hearts no longer meet each other at all; neither can reach the other because both of them withdraw and live for themselves.

So too fallen man no longer seeks God in loving devotion to God as a person. He treats him like an object which one grasps by observing it, investigating it, critically evaluating it, or getting control of it by some kind of accomplishment or spiritual machination. The doctrine of original sin declares that every attempt of man to deny the rift in his relationship to God or to restore it by his own means is nothing but a repetition of the original sin. It declares therefore that every road

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from man to God, every road from below upward, is a wrong road. It declares that there is a fundamental difference between all the ways that the religions of man pursue to come to God and the Christian way, in which man does not come to God but God comes to man.

Is God Above Caring?

We shall try to illustrate this further by using the metaphor of marriage. A man who has broken the relationship of love and fidelity to his wife is quite incapable of restoring the broken relationship by himself.

In many cases he will not even understand what has happened. He will ask himself what his wife has actually been deprived of by his attitude, since, after all, he has always been supporting her. Perhaps he may even feel that it is an unfair jealousy if his wife feels that she has been deeply offended. But this only proves that he has no idea whatsoever of what is self-giving love, which seeks a genuine meeting of "I" and "thou." He lives in his selfish solitariness and knows her only as an object which he uses, but not as a subject for whom he lives.

So it is with men who have not yet realized the amazing fact that the Creator God has allied himself in love with his human creatures. They think of God, if ever they think of him seriously at all, as a self-sufficient force that can do no harm to them whatsoever and also does not care if men pay no attention to him. They consider that it is a mere anthropomorphism (humanizing of God) when the Bible dares to say, "'You shall worship no other god, for the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God'" (Exod. 34:14). They consider dispassionate sublimity more divine than the passionate devotion of seeking love.

Do Moral Actions Help?

Alongside of this attitude of man toward God, which we

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may call the neopagan attitude, there is another, which is peculiar to the legalistic religions. This is comparable to the attitude of the husband who realizes that he has offended, not an ordinance, but a person, not against individual obligations. But then he thinks that he himself can patch up the broken relationship. He tries to restore the love relationship by his own efforts and performances. He therefore attempts to compensate his wife by bringing her gifts or doing something for her. And in doing so he completely overlooks the fact that love betrayed can never be earned again by any performances, not even by any kind of penitential exercises. For even when he performs the greatest of acts he is still making of love a kind of business relationship in which the love that is owed is paid for or some kind of compensation is given in its stead. This is the way the rabbinical Jews in Jesus' time tried to come to God. Paul said of them: "I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but it is not enlightened. For, being ignorant of the righteousness that comes from God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. For Christ is the end of the law, that every one who has faith may be justified" (Rom. 10:2-4).

Similar to this Jewish way to God is the way of all religions in which a man seeks to force his way to God by works or performances, in other words, by cultic sacrifices, pious exercises, or great moral achievements. Humanly speaking, such performances only make a dismal thing of love; for when it is met with such performances love knows, even when it senses the zeal that is back of them, that it has been misunderstood and degraded into a thing that one can buy and earn.

Only God Can Heal the Breach

So the original sin of man, the breach in his relationship to God, cannot be overcome by man at all; it can be healed only by God. This again may be illustrated by the example of mar-

riage. If a broken marriage is really to be healed, that healing cannot emanate from the guilty party. But healing is possible, if the love that has been offended remains unswervingly an outgoing, giving love. A partner who has this gift of God within him will doubtless—perhaps almost involuntarily—show by his reaction how deeply he has been hurt. But then he will simply pass over the wrong that has been done to his love and seek with redoubled love to win back the other person. Then, of course, it depends upon the other person whether he will accept this love. He may reject this proffered love in callous lovelessness that desires its own selfish freedom, or in a false pride that will not accept anything, or in an unbelieving despair that retreats within its own shell. Love does not force him to open up, nor does it desire to force him; but it invites him to appreciate its depth and magnitude, to accept what it has to give, and to respond in the devotion of a genuine gratitude. When that happens in a marriage, the fault is not merely indulgently forgiven, but it is borne by both together. And this bearing of a fault together can bind them together more strongly and deeply than before.

What About Christ?

All this confronts us with another question, and one that we men cannot grasp: How can this thing that sometimes happens between two people who see and meet each other happen in the relationship between man and God? It cannot happen through words alone. Even the best teaching about the love of God cannot take the place of the act of sacrificial love itself. Even the most impressive utterances of the Old Testament prophets concerning the love of God were no more than the promise of a future event. They were therefore able to awaken in the hearts of conscientious Jews the yearning for reconciliation with God, but they never got farther than the belief that they must earn this future love by their own achievements. So in the course of

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history the devout Jew became the devout zealot who, with all his efforts, never got beyond a kind of servant or business relationship with God. The Bible says that only with the coming of Christ was original sin really overcome. Not until he came was the promise fulfilled which God had given to the Old Testament prophets: " 'A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances' " (Ezek. 36:26-27).

Only in Christ—the church teaches—does a full, personal encounter and reconciliation between God and man take place. In Christ the mystery of the divine Person himself became something that we can grasp, because in him God's love grasps us in so far as we open ourselves to it. Confession of faith in Christ is therefore the center of the Christian faith and this must be discovered before everything else, lest everything we have said so far remain at the level of mere human questions and searchings without an ultimate divine answer.

The First Article of the Common Creeds of the Christian Church

I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of
heaven and earth.

—*The Apostles' Creed*

I believe in one God the Father Almighty, Maker of
heaven and earth, And of all things visible and
invisible.

—*The Nicene Creed*

PART TWO

God in the Son of Man, Jesus Christ

The Word of God and the Speech of Man

If we are to say anything that is certain about God, the world of God and the world of men must somehow meet. God himself must reveal himself. He must speak. But how are men, with their earth-bound concepts, to understand him? God must unveil the secret of his Spirit. But how can men understand the Spirit of God unless he enters the spirit of a man? And how can a man communicate his mind and spirit to another man unless it be through speech? But how can I understand the speech of another if he speaks in a strange language? How shall another translate his message into my language if he speaks out of another spiritual world and there are no words in my language to express it? How else is the revelation of God to take place at all unless God himself enters into our world and his Word becomes our words?

"In the Beginning Was the Word"

When John the evangelist wrote the story and the creed of Jesus Christ for the Greeks in Asia Minor, he began with these words: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). When John did that, he was trying to communicate to the Greeks in their thought forms what the primitive Christian community in Palestine was saying when it called Jesus the Messiah and the Son of God. This was a bold venture. John was using an expression familiar to pagan philosophy and therefore he had to run the risk that for his hearers pagan ideas might become mixed in with his message.

Greek philosophy had outgrown naïve paganism with its manlike gods. Their ideas about the origin of the world came close to what was said about the world and God in the first chapters of the Bible.

Like the Bible, the Greek philosophers put "the Word" at the beginning of their cosmogony or creation of the world. In the biblical account of creation each day of creation is solemnly introduced by the words, "And God said." The narrator, when he wrote these words, was consciously setting up an antithesis to the pagan conceptions current in his Near Eastern environment. In the Near Eastern religions the creatures of this earth were interpreted, not as being the result of the operation of a divine spirit and will, but rather as the products of the sexual generative power of the gods. The Greek philosophers taught that there is an ultimate formative power in the world—the primal principle of unity. From this impersonal, abstract deity, the unity, there emanated the Logos (the Word) and from the Logos in turn there emanated the *logoi spermatikoi* (words scattered like seeds). Underlying every creature there is a kind of creative thought, an idea. This is the real essence of the creature. The Logos is that which holds together at its core the world and all the structures within it. Accordingly, both the Greek philosophers in the time of Jesus and the writer of the biblical story of creation put at the beginning of the world, not the forces and urges of nature, but the divine Spirit, the Word.

Despite this external similarity between the biblical and the Greek cosmogony, however, there is a profound difference between them. For the Greek philosophers there stands at the beginning an intellectual principle to which man advances as he turns away from the reality of this world and applies himself to the realm of ideas by detaching his thought from visible reality (abstraction). From this the Greeks argued that anybody who concerns himself with ideas, and thus with the spiritual world, is nearer to God and the ultimate realities than

the man who applies himself to the world of the senses. To the Greeks the philosophers were far closer to the deity than manual workers or farmers, since the latter were always drudging their life out over material things.

The Creator God who, according to the Holy Scriptures, called the world into being through his Word, is not an impersonal, intellectual principle like the Logos of the Greeks. His power, which orders and holds the world together at its core, is not the idea of unity but of creative love. God is the Lord who creates the good and commands us to do good. He is not to be approached by way of the abstraction of the spirit. He allows himself to be found in the grateful acceptance of his created gifts and through active willingness to love God and one's neighbor. According to the Bible, it is not the one who thinks correctly but the one who does what is good who is well-pleasing to God, and only he who is well-pleasing to God knows him.

The fusion of biblical and Greek conceptions of God and the fundamental constitution of the world not only built a bridge from the world of biblical faith to the world of paganism; it also produced a chain of misconceptions of the biblical message, and, above all, it brought about that contempt for the body and physical work which to this day has poisoned life both in the church and in society.

Translation of the Word Into an Alien Language

When John employed the language of the Greek philosophers to bring the message of the Bible to the Greeks, he therefore set out upon a path that was beset by perils. And yet it was the only way in which human speech is capable of communicating divine things. John sought out, as it were, the nearest point on the hither shore of this pagan language to which he might fling a bridge, a point which in any case was closer than the other Greek conceptions of God. This must be

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the criterion for the soundness of any translation of the biblical message into the language and the life of any period in time. Always the point that lies nearest to the gospel must be discovered in order that an initial, provisional understanding may be reached, which then may grow and deepen.

The Gothic bishop, Ulfilas, was faced with the same task of translating the biblical witness about God into a pagan language when he translated the Bible from Latin into German. The very first sentence of the Bible, which speaks of "God," confronted him with an almost insoluble problem. Should he translate, "In the beginning Wotan created the heavens and the earth"? Should he employ the Germanic conception of God to proclaim the message of the Bible, since there were no other words in this language to indicate the Lord of heaven and earth? Ulfilas did not do so, because he knew that then the whole complex of Germanic conceptions of the gods would overlay the biblical witness concerning God. So, since he had no word to indicate the Creator of the world, he simply translated: "In the beginning the Good created the heavens and the earth." From this translation of Ulfilas, the Gothic bishop, the word "God" came into all the Germanic languages. But the dangers in this were no less great than the evangelist John's decision to proclaim the message of Christ by means of the Greek conception of the Logos. Because, according to the Germanic Bible, it was "the Good" who created the world, the Germans carried over into their conception of God everything they had previously meant by the word "good." For the ancient Germans God became a noble knight. It took great effort gradually to make it clear to the Germans that it is not the warlike hero, not the one who carries everything before him by violence, but rather the one who suffers and loves, who is good in the divine sense.

This translation of the message of God into the language of the ancient Greeks and Germans was not the first instance in which both illumination and obscuration of the message were

brought about. This was the case even among the Jews themselves. Every word that men use to signify God or the divine is an image which is taken from the everyday, sinful world of men. The word for God most frequently used by the Jews was the word "Lord." This word expressed the power of God which is superior to that of all men and all gods. But in a sinful world a lord is also a tyrant who destroys the aliens and rewards his own according to their merits. And in the time of Jesus this was the Jews' conception of God.

The image of the Messiah, the "anointed King," which the prophecy of the Old Testament applied to the expected Bringer of the salvation of God in this world, was meant to arouse hope in the coming of a kingly rescuer who would liberate the people from evil and from the abominations of heathenism. But in the word "Messiah" there was also the germ of the nationalistic dream of a God-king whose prime mission would be to drive the Romans out of their country. Hence all these human words are inevitably filled with very human, very self-centered connotations.

The Language of Faith Is Picture Language

It would be wrong to think that one can compress the message of God once and for all into definite words and formulas and thus secure it against human distortions. All words about divine things acquire their proper signification only to the extent that the person who hears and speaks them himself comes closer to God. The inner transformation of a people and their whole world of thought by the gospel also brings with it a continuing purification of their religious language. And, conversely, the fall of a people away from God leads to a darkening of the language with which they speak about God. For all religious language is picture language, and the full substance of the image or picture is grasped only by the person who himself has become a reflected image of that which he wishes to pro-

claim. Thus Paul says in his famous chapter on love: "Now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood" (I Cor. 13:12).

And yet the church in its teaching and preaching is obliged to undertake this task of translation in the name of the love of God. God is a man-seeking God. Because he speaks to men, he gives himself. He divests himself of his true being. In human speech he enters into the images of human imagination and thinking. The danger is always present that men may take these images into their unholy hands, confound the image with what it is intended to portray, twist and turn it about, and from them manufacture their own gods. Even in the church there exists a pagan image worship of language, in which people " 'think that the Deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, a representation by the art and imagination of man' " (Acts 17:29b). Many of the controversies in the church, when they are merely strife about words, have their roots in this image worship of language.

The Idolatry of Language

This image worship of language occurs whenever people cease to listen with open heart and conscience to what this picture language of the Bible is trying to say and make the words into mere instruments of their intellectual self-assertion. "The heart makes the theologian," says an old proverb, and a modern writer, Saint-Exupéry, says the same thing: "One sees well only with the heart." The words of the Bible and the Christian creeds are mirrors of the invisible. Depending upon the angle from which one looks into it, however, they also reflect exceedingly human, indeed banal and superstitious things. When words of faith are torn out of their context, when the mirror is turned this way and that way, it also reflects something quite different from what it was intended to communicate to us.

To this extent the language of faith is similar to the language

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of the poets. The poets too attempt to express the unutterable and touch the depths of our souls by means of their picture language. Take, for example, these verses of Rilke:

"Now sleeping lie the fallow fields
Only my heart keeps watch and hails
The Evening, as in his bourn, he yields
And reefs his crimson sails.
"O blessed vigil, dream-delight!
Now pilgrim Night strides through the land,
Holding the moon, a lily white,
Blossoming in his hand."

Of course, one can dissect a poem like this and make it the object of a philosophical investigation. But the only person who can explain to us such a poem is one who himself has been moved by it. Poets and witnesses speak about things that are different, of course, but they both use a language which must speak in pictures, because what they are trying to utter does not exist in the sensual, external, material world.

Reason, the Unperceiving Mirror

This is not to say that the language of faith has to do only with feelings. We cannot perceive without reason. The thinking through of the statements of faith—in other words, the work of theology—is actually an indispensable help toward bringing out the continuity of the whole and gaining the right angle from which to look into the mirror. Without an ability to think, the real meaning of Christian words cannot be understood. But when we dissect and dismember a statement we may also destroy the very essence of the message. The intellectual analysis of a love letter does not by itself make us any more capable of getting at the heart and the secret of the person who wrote it. The person who scrutinizes the component parts of the mirror when he should be looking into the eyes of him who is looking

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at us through the mirror is a fool. He perceives nothing and sees nothing but the external things which are amenable to him.

The Logos, the Word Reflected in a Man

If the Word of God is to reach us, if God himself is to be experienced and known as a holy and loving Will, we must look into the mirror of the human words which he employs and look into it with the eyes of the heart. Then we shall see that in the truest sense his Word is a communication of God himself, just as a genuine love letter can be a communication of a person's innermost being.

This is what John the evangelist was saying when he wrote, "In the beginning was the Word," and also that other sentence in the first chapter of his Gospel, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." What he meant was this: "The whole creation of the world is one long love letter of God in which God communicates his goodness to all creatures. As light radiates from the source of light and illuminates and warms us, so the creative and sustaining strength of God's goodness is constantly radiating from him. This outflowing of the wisdom and goodness of God, this Logos, this Word is the source of all life and all knowledge."

But the world today is no longer what it was when it issued from the Word of God. Life in this world no longer deserves the verdict once pronounced upon it: "And God saw that it was good." The freedom which God in his goodness bestowed upon his creatures gave them the opportunity to turn away from the Source of life and autonomously build their own empire. Since then the whole creation, and above all men and their words, no longer reflect God as a clear mountain lake reflects the sun. The mirror has grown dull and murky. But if we are to know God's true being, we must meet it in a clean and shining mirror. Only a creature who is wholly surrendered to God, who lives wholly by his light, and yet remains one whom

we men can grasp and know can ever show us God as he really is. Long ago the men of the Old Testament were yearning for the day when God would again send forth his Word into the world so clearly and ringingly, so luminously and warmingly, that it would be the very dividing point between truth and error, light and darkness, good and evil.

John the evangelist declared to his readers that this divine event had happened. The Word became flesh in a Man who was the image of God and reflected him in complete clarity and purity. In the Man Jesus, therefore, there appeared in this world the Logos, the Word, to whom all creatures owe their life. And that is why John at the beginning of his Gospel extols the light that appeared to the world in this pure, unblemished mirror of divine love: "The true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world knew him not. He came to his own home, and his own people received him not. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God; who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father" (John 1:9-14).

Faith in the Son of God

For countless people the Christian faith contains many profound truths, the validity of which is attested by their consciences. But as soon as the church speaks of Jesus as the Son of God it seems impossible for them to declare themselves Christians. They consider this belief in the Son of God a religious mythology, indeed, a coercive dogma that appears to be completely incompatible with their conceptions of God and with modern thought. The fact is that from the beginning the church has fought against precisely these mythological conceptions which people frequently associate with confession of faith in the Son of God. Hence we must state very clearly what is actually meant when a man is called the "Son of God" in the Bible and the teaching of the church.

The Bible Speaks of Christ in Various Images

Whenever men make statements about divine things they speak in human images. Even the church's creed, which declares that Jesus Christ is "the only-begotten Son of God," is a human manner of speaking, for nobody thinks that there is any relation of sexual origin between Jesus the Son and God the Father. Nobody believes that now there are two Gods in heaven, the old one and a young one. Rather, the familiar image of personal relationship between father and son is employed in order to describe the primal image of this personal relation, the close, intrinsic union between Jesus Christ and his divine Lord and Father. The Bible uses a great many other images to illustrate this relationship which are no less effective and valid. The Apostles' Creed, however, merely selected from

the great profusion of biblical descriptions of the relationship between Jesus and God those which call Jesus the Son of God, and, as we shall see, it had good reason for doing so. Perhaps it may help us to understand, however, if we try first to illustrate the church's confession of Jesus Christ with these other images and conceptions which are employed in the New Testament. This will be more likely to safeguard us against misunderstandings of what is meant by faith in the "Son of God."

Jesus, the Word

As we have already seen, John the evangelist uses the term Logos, the Word, to describe the divine nature of Jesus. A word reveals what is in a person. If it is a genuine word, it communicates to us the nature and attitude of a person. So John says in the first place that Jesus is to God what a genuine word is to one who has spoken it. Jesus was so inseparably united to God himself that in Jesus' words God himself meets us. Indeed, it is not only Christ's words that are God's message to us; to a far greater degree his life of obedience and love is a revelation of the true nature and the real attitude of our Creator. Because Jesus walks with men, God walks with them. If Jesus gives himself to men, then the very heart's blood of the love of God flows through this world every day. He is not merely a word, but *the* Word of God, because he is the only man in whom we encounter in such purity what God has in his heart and what he has to say to us.

The same thing was meant when, later on, the church declared that in Jesus we are met by the *person* of God himself. But when we say that in Jesus we meet the person of God himself this does not mean that God changed himself into a Jewish rabbi, as, for example, the goddess Athena changed herself into a shepherd in Homer's *Odyssey*. What is meant is that we meet the mystery of the person of God in and through the man Jesus, because this man lived and carried out in total

obedience, complete surrender, and absolute trust what the Spirit of God inspired in him.

The Image of God

Paul is saying the same thing when he uses another word to describe the nature of Jesus. He calls Jesus "the likeness of God" (II Cor. 4:4). In another passage he calls him "the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation" (Col. 1:15). This description of the nature of Jesus harks back to the biblical account of creation where it is said that "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him" (Gen. 1:27). Here man is compared with a mirror into which one may look and through which another person can see our face. This happens when a mirror catches the rays of an image in such a way that the image is clearly and purely reflected. In itself the mirror is not divine. Man is created from earthly material, but he is nevertheless ordained to be God's image. What is divine is what shines through him when he is fully oriented toward his primal image and receives and reflects that image with spotless purity. The Christian faith does not recognize any kind of genealogical descent of man from God as do the pagan mythologies. And Jesus himself is no exception to this. But Jesus does say of himself, according to John's Gospel: "The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority; but the Father who dwells in me does his works" (John 14:10).

This saying makes clear what is meant by the image of God: It is not the face of God but rather the mystery of the person of God that is reflected in Christ. This is why it is immaterial for faith to know what Christ looked like and what his physical appearance was. When Christianity meets Christ it faces only the One whose person looks upon us and meets us through Christ. Thus Paul says: "From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once re-

garded Christ from a human point of view, we regard him thus no longer. Therefore, if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come" (II Cor. 5:16-17).

The Faithful and True Witness

The same faith is expressed in still another figure, in which Jesus is compared with an unimpeachable witness. Thus in the Book of Revelation a message of the exalted Christ to the church in Laodicea begins with this statement: "The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God's creation" (Rev. 3:14). When a wife, whose husband has vanished into a far-off prison camp, after many years receives a visit from a messenger who has returned from there, it makes a critical difference to her whether that messenger is a faithful and true witness who does not get things mixed up or give way to his imagination. He is dependable only if he simply repeats what has been committed to him. A faithful witness is like a clear window through which one can see the nature of God. Fallen man, who wants by his own power to be as God (Gen. 3:5), is like a colored window that draws all the light to itself and presents itself with all its colorful brilliance to the spectator. Christ desires to be nothing more than a witness who humbly received and communicates what is given to him by God. Thus Jesus says of himself: " 'My teaching is not mine, but his who sent me. . . . He who speaks on his own authority seeks his own glory; but he who seeks the glory of him who sent him is true, and in him there is no falsehood' " (John 7:16, 18). It is this absolute humility of the witness that also prompts Jesus to say concerning himself, " 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me' " (John 14:6). Here was no second God or a man seating himself in God's anteroom to monopolize access to God by issuing arbitrary articles of faith. Here rather a man's own will is so

unconditionally surrendered to God that God himself shines through him.

The True Light

It was natural therefore that the relationship between Jesus and God should be compared with light whose beams, radiating from a source of light, illuminate and warm us. "The true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world" (John 1:9). So far as this beam of light is concerned, everything depends upon whether anything comes between it and the sun. And this is precisely what is the peculiar and unique thing about Jesus.

In the first centuries after Christ the church absolutely refused to be robbed of this gladsome experience—that here for the first time in the history of the world a man of flesh and blood remained utterly and completely transparent to God, so that God himself shone through him. The Sun of God himself, and not merely a painted sun that only looks like God, appeared to us in Christ! This is why the whole late Roman Empire was shaken by battles fought over a single letter, as Athanasius defended against Arius the doctrine that Christ is of one substance with God (*homoousios*) and not only of like substance (*homoiousios*). In the true man Jesus we meet, not a godlike man, but the one, true God himself. Strange as these hotly contested human formulations may seem to be, these were no trivial questions that Christianity fought over at that time. What was at stake was the question whether Jesus appeared as a deified man, who became almost like God, or as a real man, through whom, however, the mystery of the person of God himself addresses us.

The Son of Man

Strangely enough, therefore, Christianity defended its faith

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in the true divinity of Christ by the very act of declaring that Jesus was truly human and not merely seemingly human. In the accounts of Jesus' life from his birth to his death very critical importance is repeatedly attached to the fact that he was a real human being. At the beginning a child lies wrapped in swaddling clothes in a manger. At the close we find a man in Gethsemane, shaken by all the terrors of body and soul, and a corpse from which there flowed blood and water. Jesus himself preferred to call himself the "Son of man." And when he used this term Jesus was calling himself a man and yet at the same time the bringer of the kingdom of God, which Daniel associated with this word (Dan. 7:13). Paul wrote to the Philippians that the unique thing about Jesus was that, unlike Adam, he did not try to seize hold of likeness to God but took the form of a servant and became like other men. The unique thing about him was this very fact that he humbled himself and was willing to render ultimate obedience. He did not, like the rest of us men, make himself independent of God, put himself in the center, and try to assert his godlikeness and set himself up alongside of God (Phil. 2:6-8). Just because he was the only one who totally accepted and affirmed the fact that before God he was only a man and a creature who lived solely by the love of God, he is the unique revelation of God. "Therefore," says Paul, "God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil. 2:9-11).

The Son of God

Having canvassed this rich variety of New Testament witness, we should now see more clearly what the church is confessing and what it is not confessing when it confesses its faith in the "Son of God." It is not professing faith in two Gods, or

even three, including the Holy Spirit. It is not denying that Jesus was a man of flesh and blood, just as we are. It is not asserting that Jesus walked this earth as an omniscient God and only seemingly possessed a human form. In defiance of all such mythological retouchings of the image of Jesus the church clung to the faith that Jesus was a man. Even in his religious life he was a man, not an omniscient God. He did not know, any more than did any other man, the day and the hour that God has set for the end of the world and the final judgment (Matt. 24:36). Indeed, just like every other fallible human being, he was "one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sinning" (Heb. 4:15). But it is precisely these three words, "yet without sinning," that show why the church declared its faith in the full humanity of Jesus and at the same time held fast just as unconditionally to the confession of his divinity. Jesus maintained intact that absolute dependence upon God which the powers of darkness sought by every means to break down. When the tempter said, "'If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread,'" he answered, "'It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.''" And when on the pinnacle of the temple he said to him a second time, "'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will give his angels charge of you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone,''" Jesus replied, "'Again it is written, 'You shall not tempt the Lord your God''" (Matt. 4:3-7).

All of these passages together indicate what the church is confessing when it calls Jesus the Son of God. He is the one who remained subject to God when he was tempted to put himself on a level with God. He is the one who proclaimed God's sovereignty when he was tempted to display his own lordship with the means that God had given to him. He is not a man who finally purified himself for God after many trials

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and errors. From childhood he remained in the things of his Father (Luke 2:49). So when the Christian creed employs the human image of "son" and "father" to express the relationship between Jesus and God it is pointing to the innermost personal identity of being between the man Jesus and his God. This identity of being was not achieved by Jesus himself; it was given to and implanted in him by God from the very beginning of his life. He held onto it in faith, love, and obedience through the utmost extremes of temptation.

Of course, this confession of Jesus as the Son of God gave rise to all kinds of mythological misunderstandings. Nevertheless, of all the New Testament images it shows most clearly what, according to Jesus' disciples and the church, constitutes the unique relationship of Jesus to God—a personal, inseparable bond of love between son and father. When Jesus is described as the "Word of God," this may suggest the misunderstanding that he is simply a bearer of divine ideas which he has transmitted to us and which we can make our own. If we speak of him only as the "Light of God," this suggests the misunderstanding that some impersonal, intellectual, spiritual radiation from God passed through Jesus to us. If we speak of the "Image and Mirror" of God, we may think that the main thing is that we derive from Jesus a concept of God. None of these really brings us into fellowship with God. But this is the decisive thing; for, through Jesus, God brings us men into the personal fellowship of father and son. Christ takes us men into the brotherhood of his love, just as he himself was "the first-born among many brethren" (Rom. 8:29) and from the very origin of his being was a son of God.

We come to a knowledge of the personal God, as has been made clear before, only when man and God meet in a love relationship of "I" and "Thou" and both are bound together in mutual self-giving. There is only one man in whom this can be seen in a way that convinces both heart and conscience

—Jesus Christ. In union with him, therefore, Christianity found the heart of God. And therefore for Christianity the confession of Jesus Christ as the Son of God became the foundation of knowledge of God and man, the very source of divine revelation.

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God has spoken to men at all times and in many ways. The wonder of creation, the speech of the prophets, the teaching of devout parents, and the voice of conscience leave no man untouched by the message of God. Is there a standard by which we can tell which revelation is the right one? Is there a comfort in doubt and despair that is sure and dependable? This can be true only if men are able to meet God personally. But how can we ever meet anybody personally unless we encounter him face to face? How can one meet face to face the God of heaven and earth and meet him personally unless he appears in the mirror of a human person, with whom one can speak, who can be seen and yet unveils to us, not merely human ideas and human life, but solely the being, the will, and the thoughts of God? These are not merely questions of centuries past. The question of a personal revelation of God is the question of life today. Christianity finds it answered in the person of Jesus Christ.

"Born of the Virgin Mary"

The basic prerequisite for personal communion between man and God is not a man's ascent to God but God's coming down to man. He must reveal himself in person. This communion or fellowship is the prerequisite of all knowledge of God. The so-called Christian West, which means the world whose laws, social structures, and conscience have been stamped by the Christian message, draws its life from the faith that such a personal revelation actually occurred, that God in fact did

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come down to men. The Christian faith believes that this event took place in the appearance of Jesus Christ, who was born on earth two thousand years ago, walked the earth for thirty years, lived a life of love, and died in obedience to God and in trust in God's love. It was this event of a descent of divine light and divine revelation that the primitive church desired to proclaim and confess in its stories of the birth of Christ. One should therefore not say that these statements of the Christian creed concerning Christ's birth are immaterial and that they may well be set aside. For in that case one could quite properly ask why the church does not summon up the courage simply to strike out these passages in its creed (which are spoken and presented to the sponsors at every baptism). The fact is, of course, that what the primitive church actually meant by the article of faith, "born of the Virgin Mary," is of decisive importance. That is to say that here the church is confessing its faith that in Jesus there appeared the one man who did not have to make laborious efforts to come closer to God. On the contrary, through him God in his personal love came to man. Thus in the Gospel of John Christ says to the Jews concerning himself, " 'You are from below, I am from above; you are of this world, I am not of this world' " (John 8:23).

All of the New Testament writers agree that man cannot redeem himself through any work of his own, however great it may be. Only God can send the Redeemer. The way that Friedrich Nietzsche recommends for the elevation and perfection of the human race—"You should propagate yourself not only onward but upward"—does not bring a man one bit closer to his God. Even if man succeeded in breeding a superman, this superman would still be no less in the dark with regard to the mystery of God and he would be no less separated from God by his guilt than any ordinary man.

The New Testament writers go on to say that in Jesus they encountered a man who in the very ground and origin of his

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being desired to be anything but a superman. Indeed, this is just what distinguished him from all other men. He was not a man who exalted himself, but a man whose whole being was determined and filled by God and his self-giving love. He was not a man who gradually achieved this purity of love through a process of purgation, but rather a man in whom the Holy Spirit of God was the determining factor of his being *from the very beginning of his life*. Not only in his words but even more in his life and deeds he was to the first Christians a bearer and revealer of the divine will and mind. To the New Testament witnesses it was this uninterrupted and unqualified oneness with God that was the unique thing in Jesus Christ.

A Light Not Begotten of Man

We shall understand these statements of the faith of the Christian church only if we clearly distinguish them from the pagan misunderstandings which have repeatedly obscured our understanding of the divine birth of Jesus Christ. Thus there have always been people who imagine that the primary purpose of the so-called doctrine of the virgin birth of Jesus was to keep Jesus' birth clear of any implications of a human sexual act. The "fleshliness" of this act must not be allowed to play any part in the birth of Jesus, lest he become subject to original sin. Such ideas are alien to the men of the Bible. In the pagan world sexuality was sometimes viewed as being evil in itself and in later centuries these ideas also found their way into the Christian church. Among all the gifts of creation the Bible praises God also for the gift of procreation. The New Testament narrators had no intention of emphasizing that the divine gift of human generative power played no part in the birth of the man Jesus. But they did lay great stress upon the fact that it was not the human *will* to procreate that accomplished the birth of a spotless mirror of divine love, but solely the creative power of God. Men can receive and conceive their

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Saviour only in the way that Mary conceived him when she uttered the words: " 'Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word' " (Luke 1:38). This also means that man can in no wise come closer to God by renouncing sexuality. What is required of man is that he present his own will to God and let God's will work upon him.

Jesus and the Half-Gods

Completely absurd and primitively pagan is the insinuation that according to the Christian creed Jesus is a kind of half-god who came into being in a human woman through an act of divine procreation. Greek and Roman antiquity is full of such mythologies. There are traces of it even in the Bible (Gen. 6:1ff). Ancient legend, for example, ascribes such an origin to Hercules and also to Romulus and Remus, the founders of the city of Rome.

To the writers of the New Testament the application of such ideas to the God of the Holy Scriptures would have been blasphemy. There is not even the remotest suggestion in these writings of a sexual union of God with Mary. There can be no question whatsoever of the fact that none of the New Testament reporters ever called the Holy Spirit the father and Mary the mother of Jesus. If this were the case, Jesus would have been half man and half God. On the contrary, the Christian church has at all times testified that Jesus was wholly and truly man, but that he was at the same time its Lord and God.

For the New Testament writers—that is, for those who mention it at all—the supernatural birth of Jesus was grounded upon the creative will of God which, independent of human co-operation, evoked in the body of Mary the Saviour of the world. According to Luke's account, at the annunciation of the birth of Jesus this promise was made to the mother of Jesus: " 'The power of the Most High will overshadow you' " (Luke 1:35). It was God's creative power, not human generative

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power, that brought forth the Christ. This is what Luke wanted to proclaim. Not even the most orthodox of the teachers of our church ever proclaimed anything else. David Hollaz, the leading theologian of Protestant Orthodoxy, called the birth of Jesus "a supernatural act by which the flesh of Christ, produced from the mass of the blood of the Virgin Mary, received in her womb its original being, consubstantial with her own, through the supervention of the Holy Spirit." Similarly, the well-known biblical theologian, Adolf Schlatter, said at the beginning of our century, "God created for himself a new man as an instrument and son beyond those relationships in which the tradition of power and life, which is transmitted through procreation, has placed us."

It is true that during the christological controversies in the early centuries of Christianity there was discussion of the "generation" of the Son through the Father. But this never referred to the incarnation of Jesus in the body of Mary. On the contrary, when the theologians of that time spoke of the generation of the Son they were thinking of an eternal process, comparable to light which constantly generates rays and thus reveals itself. So when we speak of the divine generation of the Son, what is meant is an eternal radiation of the love of God before the beginning of the world, an act that has nothing whatsoever to do with sexual conception. Thus the Nicene Creed, which is still accepted as valid in the Christian churches today, declares that Christ was "begotten of his Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, . . . being of one substance with the Father." This eternal Christ was the one "who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made man."

God in Human Form?

Christendom at all times has also rejected the idea that Jesus

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was a God changed into human form. There were, of course, many such accounts of divine charades in the pagan legends of antiquity. They are completely alien to the New Testament. The erroneous doctrine that God merely occupied the body of Jesus during his lifetime as an outward shell—that he, so to speak, slipped into him at his baptism and slipped out again before his death (Docetism)—was also firmly rejected by the Christian church. In Christ God is not merely fighting a sham battle with evil. It is his true nature to sacrifice himself and give himself to those he loves. God himself becomes, as a New Testament writer says, the high priest who is able to sympathize with our weaknesses (Heb. 4:15). To the evangelist Luke it was a miracle of the condescending God himself that Christ should lie a helpless child in the most miserable of human surroundings. And he expresses it in these words: “ ‘You will find a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger’ ” (Luke 2:12).

The Meaning of Believing in the Virgin Birth

If we of the twentieth century are to understand and believe the Christian creed concerning the birth of Jesus, it will depend on our understanding what is essential in it for the New Testament and the whole Christian church. The essential thing is not the natural process that took place at the birth of Jesus. When the Bible presents its accounts of miracles the question as to whether or not God employed the customary orders of nature is irrelevant. The “babe wrapped in swaddling cloths” is the sign of the condescending goodness of God, not of the natural process in the body of his mother. It was not the exclusion of Joseph from the birth of Jesus but rather the sovereign intervention of God that was the important thing to the primitive church. For the primitive church the question whether God used only Mary or also Joseph as an instrument and vessel of his purpose was not the central question at all. This accords

with the fact that the story of the miraculous act of God in the body of Mary does not occur at all in the writings of the two great apostles, Paul and John, even though the center of their message is the confession of Jesus Christ, the Son of God and Saviour of the world. The evangelist Matthew traces the lineage of Jesus from David to Joseph (not to Mary), but then goes on to narrate the account of the virgin birth of Jesus which was current in the primitive Christian church. Today we can no longer ascertain whether Mary herself, who would have been the only person in a position to do so, recounted to the disciples of Jesus the miracle story of the virgin birth. It may also be possible that this story was an attempt on the part of the primitive Christian church and the generations following to explain the miracle of the unique, God-dedicated personality of Jesus. If this were the case, then the story of the birth of Jesus would be a figurative, childlike interpretation of that statement which, according to John, Jesus himself made about his coming from God (John 8:23).

The Mystery Remains

Ultimately, the origin of the man Jesus is covered by the darkness of divine mystery which cannot be dispelled by human thought and understanding. And therefore the person who philosophizes about the possibility or the impossibility of the divine generation of a man never meets his Saviour at Christmas. The birth and growth of every man is an unexplainable miracle of divine creation. We can see no scientific reason why the sovereign Lord of the world should not have chosen ways other than the usual natural ways to carry out his will. But the decision between faith and unbelief is not made when we describe the scientifically ascertainable external side of God's actions. The person who doubts that the account of Luke is based upon an account given by the mother of Jesus is at liberty to view it as a contemporary interpretation of the mystery of

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Jesus' divine sonship. What is really determinative for the believer is whether he himself has that experience of divine revelation through Jesus which prompted the apostle Peter to confess: " ' Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life; and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God' " (John 6:68-69).

The Sacrifice of Reconciliation

Wherever among mankind there has been a reverence for the gods the question of how human guilt can be removed has also been a burning question. Every man who takes God and himself seriously knows that he is accountable for himself and what he has done. Therefore he also knows that it would be in accord neither with the dignity of God nor of man to think of our guilt as no more than a chalk mark that can be erased with the stroke of a sponge. Man's every deed cuts an indelible furrow in the lot of other men. The sight of these furrows belies every attempt to deny it or shut one's eyes to it. The question of how to erase guilt is therefore synonymous with the question of how peace of heart can be gained without lying.

A Separation Must Be Removed

When two partners are in business, debts are canceled by a process of give-and-take. In the chapter on original sin we have already made it clear that this procedure is impossible when we are dealing, not with business debts, but with moral debt. Here no payment or performance avails; the only thing that counts is the redeeming, reconciling power of love.

In the relationship between man and God it is not merely a matter of clearing off the *debt*. As long as the debtor is only out to get rid of his old debts a genuine reconciliation is quite impossible. Then the cancellation of the debt would mean nothing more than letting the debtor go free, as a judge lets off a juvenile lawbreaker.

God does not let his children go. He loves them. He wants to win them back again. He wants to end the separation. He

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wants to move their hearts. He wants to overcome, not merely their indebtedness, but their sin, which means their separation from God. Reconciliation means that we men again become sons of the love of God. This is the theme we must speak about when we speak of the sacrifice of reconciliation that was made on the cross.

There have been in the church various one-sided interpretations of the cross of Christ which make it difficult or actually impossible for us modern men to understand the cross. We shall attempt, first, to remove these misunderstandings, which must be done before the real meaning of the cross of Christ, according to the words of Holy Scripture, can become clear to us in all its reconciling power.

Who Reconciles Whom?

At the beginning of the high Middle Ages about the year 1100 a monk named Anselm of Canterbury wrote a theological book which influenced Christian conceptions of the meaning of the cross of Christ for many centuries. It bore the title *Cur Deus Homo?* which means "Why Did God Become Man?" Anselm was trying to bring home the message of the cross to the people of his time, especially the Germanic peoples. For the Germanic peoples it was inconceivable that a severe offense could be forgiven unless the guilty person made expiation or suffered punishment for it. It was against their sense of justice and their sense of the dignity of man simply to cancel a debt. Anselm believed that God too was subject to these principles of juridical justice. These principles prevented the eternal God from forgiving the guilt of men until an expiatory sacrifice had been made for men. But, said Anselm, it was utterly impossible for men to make this payment. A violation of the honor and love of God is not a finite but an infinite wrong. And therefore it cannot be wiped out by any sacrifice made by man but only by a divine sacrifice of life. For this reason it was necessary that

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God himself should become man in Christ, in order that he himself might offer the necessary atonement in man's stead. Thus God's love in Christ amassed before the divine Judge a treasury of merit that was infinitely great. And man draws upon this treasury of merit when he seeks a counterbalance for his guilt in order to gain divine forgiveness.

This interpretation which makes of the sacrifice of Christ a kind of Germanic lawsuit before the eternal Judge is not in accord with the teaching of the Holy Scriptures. There is no authority that is above God and that limits his sovereign freedom. There are no principles of honor and justice to which God's love is subordinate and which must be satisfied before God can begin the work of reconciliation between God and man. Nor does the Bible think in terms of a claim of merit or any kind of legal claim that Christ could enter for our benefit against God on the basis of his treasury of merit. Above all, not a single passage in the Bible says that on the cross of Christ the eternal God was reconciled by a representative of the human race. The Bible speaks of something that was quite the reverse: "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation" (II Cor. 5:19). God is the reconciler, the world is the reconciled, not the other way around! Men are again made the sons of God.

This clarification disposes of one substantial objection that is raised against the cross of Christ today. Again and again we hear people ask with amazement how a God of love could make his willingness to forgive depend upon a bloody sacrifice that must be offered to him first. Many go so far as to say that, when it comes to forgiveness, this God of the Christians acts like Shylock in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, who insisted upon his bond and would not tear up his note until he had seen blood. That kind of gibe may be applicable to some

inadequate theological attempts to explain the cross, but not to the biblical message itself.

The "Loving God" and the Cross

In the history of thought, deviations from the full truth are frequently not rectified until they are confronted with an opposing deviation. This happened at the beginning of the nineteenth century when the Protestant theologian Schleiermacher set up the antithesis to Anselm's theological doctrine: In the cross of Calvary God is not reconciled through a man; on the contrary, God himself was reconciling the human consciousness through a sacrifice of love. In the cross God was seeking to overcome man's hatred of God, which stems from human consciousness of guilt, and was trying to remove man's mistrust of God.

The intent of this interpretation of the atoning work of Christ was to make clear again the infiniteness and the freedom of God's love. God's love demands no payment of the debt, any more than the father in the story of the prodigal demanded any indemnities whatsoever of his son. All this is perfectly true, but this doctrine too contains a misunderstanding of the cross of Christ. From this misunderstanding there developed the idea of a soft God, which found its expression in the saccharine pictures of Christ in the nineteenth century. It is the "loving God" of the nineteenth century who sent his Son to tell them not to grieve too much over their sins and finally become exasperated with God. The "loving God" of the nineteenth century is not the God of Jesus, the God of the biblical Last Judgment, the God of the Sermon on the Mount, in which even a family quarrel or a covetous look is met with the condemnation of the eternal Judge. The God in whom Jesus believed is a God who is to be feared, a God who under no circumstances ever concludes a foul peace. It is precisely at the cross of Calvary that human sin is characterized as what it is, namely, a revolt against

God or an irreconcilable antagonism to the holy love of God. Therefore the orthodoxists of the nineteenth century quite rightly cited against Schleiermacher the ancient saying of Anselm: "*Nondum considerasti quantum ponderis peccatum* [You have not considered how great was the weight of sin]."

Why Did Jesus Go to the Cross?

Anybody who reads the story of the passion of Christ impartially and yet not without reverence will find that for Jesus himself the road to the cross was simply a road of obedience. As the Bible presents it, Jesus' whole life and therefore also his way to death was grounded in his willingness to walk the way of God unswervingly to the end. The cross was the consequence of Jesus' clinging steadfastly to love for God and for men, including the publicans and sinners. Jesus was conscious of his unique divine mission. He knew the infinite love with which God loved not only the Jews who were faithful to the Law, but also the pagans and men who had fallen away from God. It was his unswerving loyalty to this faith that brought Jesus into conflict with the scribes and Pharisees of the Jewish people. The assertion of his messianic mission also made Jesus a suspicious character in the eyes of the Roman governor. Thus ultimately Jesus' obedience to the will of God brought him to the cross. We see in him the unique image of a man who could not be dissuaded, either by fear, hatred, self-righteousness, or religious or political fanaticism, from clinging simply to God and his love. He persevered to the end in that childlike obedience of one who unswervingly declares that he belongs to God.

This is why the church declares that at the cross of Golgotha, as nowhere else, it became clear that Christ was the Son of God. The apostle Paul writes that Christ "humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name" (Phil. 2:8-9). The same is said in the

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Letter to the Hebrews: "Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and being made perfect he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him" (Heb. 5:8-9).

Jesus' way to the cross was therefore God's way. His willingness to suffer and to die at the hands of men was not merely his own heroic decision, not his own consistent loyalty to some human idea, nor even his own offer to suffer death vicariously for others. If Jesus' death were no more than human heroism, human consistency, or human willingness to sacrifice oneself, we could find many parallels to his death in human history. All the way from the death of Socrates, the philosopher, to the willingness of modern soldiers to risk their lives for hard-pressed comrades we could think of countless impressive and exemplary sacrifices which are worthy of our reverence. But none of these sacrifices can reconcile us with God. If Jesus' death were only the outcome of a human love, loyalty, and willingness to sacrifice, his death would not be different basically from the death of other men who died for us.

Jesus' death is not only something that a man willed or accomplished. Jesus' death, exactly like his whole life, is an unclouded mirror of the divine will; for everything that Jesus did was nothing else than devotion to the will of God. What Jesus did—so the church believes—God does. Jesus is, as it were, the hand of God stretched out into our world. When our hand does something, we ourselves are doing something because our hand is incapable of performing any act unless it has received a command to do so from the head. But then too, a blow suffered by the hand is also a blow that we ourselves suffer. When our hand touches another person, that person is touched by ourselves. When our hand signs a message of reconciliation, then it is signed by us. The unqualified union of love, faithfulness, and obedience that existed between God and Jesus made his action the action of the heavenly Father himself.

A Sacrifice of Divine Love

What, then, did God himself do on the cross of Calvary, if what happened there was the writing of his own hand? Jesus himself answered this question in his Parable of the Wicked Vinedressers (Matt. 21:33ff.). There he told the story of a divine householder who endeavored with unspeakable patience to bring his rebellious countrymen to their senses and restore them to peace and proper obedience. First he sent one messenger after another. He was met with nothing but scorn and derision. His messengers suffered abuse and death at the hands of the vinedressers, who owed everything they possessed to the householder. Then the divine householder made one last attempt. He sent his only son, saying, " 'They will respect my son.' "

This utterance of the householder expresses the ultimate goodness, the ultimate of willingness to forgive. He stakes everything on one card, the card of love. Everything has only one purpose—to help men get away from their sin, their lostness, their impenitence, their godless self-will, and therefore from the self-destruction of their life and their community with one another. Thus Jesus' life and death for God was a tremendous act of love and fatherly concession toward sinful mankind.

But the death of Jesus also signifies something else. And this too is shown to us by Jesus himself in the continuation of that story of the rebellious vinedressers. He tells us that the divine householder in the fervor of his seeking love apparently miscalculated in sending and exposing his son. The hatred of the vinedressers toward their master and their defiance of their hereditary lord was so great that, when the son came to them defenselessly with all the good will of the father, they came to make the outrageous decision, " 'This is the heir; come, let us kill him and have his inheritance.' "

In the conclusion of this parable Jesus predicted what man-

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kind would do with himself in the end. They would refuse to accept the invitation to enter into fellowship with the divine Father. Men would carry to the extreme their will to be their own masters and their aversion to any dependence upon the love of the Father; they would spurn the outstretched hand of God's love.

According to Jesus' own words, therefore, his death was an outrageous violation of divine goodness committed by men. Men not only indifferently passed by the outstretched hand of God and scorned his love; they mocked Jesus, they beat and spat upon him, and, in doing so, they spat upon the hand of God himself. They pierced Jesus' hands and nailed him to the cross; they killed him. And when they did that, they wounded the compassionate hand of God himself.

The Cross, a Judgment of God Upon Men

At the cross, therefore, the utter lostness of mankind is exposed. The cross is a monument of the eternal infamy of all humanity. When we see it we are reminded of that hour when man's ingratitude and lovelessness showed itself capable of repudiating even the last and greatest attempt of the loving God to woo and win them back. "Men" did it! All of them together brought Jesus to the cross—the priests and the politicians, the devout and the dregs of the people, the cultured scholars and the brutal soldiers, the Semitic Jews and the Arian Romans—the whole mass of the people among whom even the disciples had mingled themselves after they had betrayed and deserted him. Not a single person of the whole human race can assert that his like was not represented there in the court of judgment when the whole crowd cried out: "Crucify him! Crucify him!"

All this, says the teaching of the Christian church, was unmasked at the cross of Calvary and erected as an eternal memorial for men. It is no wonder, then, that again and again in the last two thousand years there have been downright fanatical

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exhibitions of hatred against this monument of human shame. And certainly we should not be surprised when men prefer to erect monuments of human heroism and virtue in the centers of their towns and cities rather than the sign of the Crucified, which reminds them, not of their nobility, but of their failure, their deep disgrace and shame. The cross of Golgotha is the judgment of divine truth upon all pious, human pretense.

A Monument of Atonement

But this sign of man's hostility to God's goodness also has an altogether different significance. And it has this significance for all who recognize that this memorial contains a judgment upon themselves. Again we can find the explanation of this second meaning of the death of Jesus in words which he himself uttered. On one occasion Jesus made this mysterious statement: "'And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up [on the cross], that whoever believes in him may have eternal life'" (John 3:14-15). Jesus is here referring to a strange story in the Old Testament. There we are told that one day the children of Israel were afflicted by a plague of serpents because of their sins, and at God's command Moses erected a bronze image of a serpent. Those who looked upon it were saved from the venom of the serpent (Num. 21:9).

From ancient times the serpent has been a symbol of evil. Hence, according to this Old Testament story, the symbol of the serpent was to remind the people of the reality of evil. It was a sign of their sinfulness; for reconciliation is possible only where the truth is faced, where there is sorrow for sin. When a man will not take sin seriously he cannot take love seriously either.

When Jesus made use of this story to interpret his own death, he was saying that by his being lifted up upon the cross God was erecting a sign which would shock men into horror of evil

and at the same time enable him to participate in the reconciliation which was offered through this sign. For from this cross, which men erected, there also sounds the cry, " 'Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do' " (Luke 23:34).

It is clear that rational reflection alone cannot be sufficient to explain this. The message of God which Christians hear the cross proclaim can be fully understood only by one who allows himself to be inwardly moved and captured by this image of the sacrificial love of God which is despised by men. Only for the man who hears in the cross the voice of God speaking to his conscience will the end of the story of Jesus, the account of his resurrection, be intelligible and credible; for already, as he beholds the cross, he senses that, despite everything, love is stronger than hate. He can understand the meaning of the Easter message which declares that, despite the death of his Son and despite the guilt of man, God is still stretching out his hand to men. And that turns the cross, the sign of human wickedness, into a sign of divine reconciliation. And he who looks to the cross when he is infected by the venom of sin and tormented in conscience receives healing and salvation.

The aim of all Christian preaching is to point to this monument of human sin and divine love; here God himself has erected a sign of reconciliation for all the world. Men could do nothing to assuage the wrath of God. At the cross they did the opposite. But God responded to the piercing of Christ's hands by extending those hands again to mankind. This is the meaning of the church's message, which Paul summed up in these words: "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God" (II Cor. 5:19-20).

The Accuser Cast Down

Every man knows that there is a voice within him that accuses him when everything else is quiet. We call it the voice of conscience. It shows us the contradiction between what we do and what we should do. It keeps holding up a bill that we can't settle, because we cannot undo the past. It is well that this voice is there, for otherwise, unforewarned, we should always be piling up more debt. The sight of the cross particularly can stir up this voice within us and reproach us with the shabby way in which we have repaid the love of God.

But the Bible sees still deeper; it knows that the accusations of conscience can also produce just the opposite effect. It may result in what Wilhelm Busch was saying in his jingle, "Once a man his good name mars, then he lets down all the bars." The realization that we can never repair a wrong has a demoralizing effect. Everybody knows how dangerous are the inner voices that keep persuading us that there are certain things with which we are simply too weak to cope and that resistance and effort to do better is useless. The Bible says that this is the voice of Satan, the voice of the accuser. It seeks to block the way to God's love. It tries to make it impossible for a man to turn back. It persuades him to believe that as far as God and men, indeed, as far as he himself, is concerned, he is done for. And therefore he is thrown back upon the father of lies, the devil, if he wants to save his face. The fact is that there is a prison of guilt which no man can escape by his own strength.

Seeing the revelation of divine love in the cross and resurrection of Christ, the disciples of Jesus saw that this prison had been broken. The seer of the Book of Revelation puts it this way: "I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, 'Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night

The Sacrifice of Reconciliation

before our God' " (Rev. 12:10). Paul expresses a similar thought in the Letter to the Colossians: "You, who were dead in trespasses . . . , God made alive together with him [Christ], having forgiven us all our trespasses, having canceled the bond which stood against us . . . ; this he set aside, nailing it to the cross" (Col. 2:13-14).

As we listen to these two-thousand-year-old sentences, we hear a tremendous shout of triumph, the exultation of the liberated. It is the cry of men who know they can make a new beginning, that the way to God is still open, and that despite their guilt they can march with inner joy and boldness even through the dark door of death. This message of liberation, said Paul, has been placarded on the cross. The accuser's bill of reckoning, which confronts every man with his debt and guilt, has been nailed to this monument of human sin. But it has been canceled by a divine hand through the love of God. Everything the accuser had in hand against mankind has been stricken from his hand by God. God's love raised up the murdered Saviour and by that act robbed the satanic powers of all they possessed. Now the papers with which they frighten men are only counterfeit papers, null and void. These are devaluated papers which the accuser flashes before men, as he tells them that their sin is greater than can ever be forgiven. They are false papers, because the love of God is greater than the greatest sin of man. Every person who opens himself to this love can make a new start with a comforted conscience and a happy heart, for Christ "was put to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification" (Rom. 4:25).

Could Not God Have Reconciled the World Some Other Way?

There is still another question of our inquiring mind that remains to be answered. There are many people who find it inexplicable that the all-powerful God should allow this Jesus, of all others, who was bound to him in love as no other ever

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was, to die such an excruciating death. Could not God in his omnipotence have found some other way to effect the reconciliation of the world? Was it necessary to set up such a bloody billboard? Could he not have written what he had to say with some other writing material besides the blood of his Son—say, with the ink of a holy book or the fiery writing of a flaming blast from heaven? Why did he use this sacrifice of the blood of Christ?

When we ask this question we are actually going beyond what is proper in any question about God. It would be absurd if we human beings and our limited understanding were to set up rules by which God must act. Once we begin to ask this kind of question, we find that there are far more incomprehensible things to baffle us—above all, the fact that an all-powerful God puts up with as much evil and contempt of himself as actually goes on in the world. Nevertheless, perhaps we can use this question to make clear once more the meaning of the cross of Christ. We shall do so by retelling an ancient legend.

A king once waged a long but fruitless struggle against the poison of corruption in his kingdom. Finally he issued a stern decree that anybody who was caught taking bribes, no matter who he was, would be punished with forty lashes. The first to be discovered taking bribes was his own mother, whom he loved and honored as a faithful son. When the king heard this dreadful news, he secluded himself for three days to consider how he could possibly treat his mother with both justice and love. After the third day he ordered the people and all the great in his kingdom, including his mother, to be summoned to the court of judgment. There the king pronounced the sentence: The king's mother is condemned to receive forty lashes, but the punishment is to be executed—upon her son, the king! The king put off his crown and his royal robes,

allowed himself to be bound to a stake, and suffered his mother's punishment.

In this story the king combined love for his mother with the sacredness and seriousness of justice. It was not as if he were subject to some law of royal honor or some principle of law which no king could evade. The king himself had made this law and he could change it if he wished. But in order to save his people from the curse of corruption, he *willed* to combine his love for his mother with the execution of justice. He wanted to show his mother and also the people how serious he was about his law and how great was his love. So he hallowed in his own body the law which was in danger of being buried altogether. He overcame the peril that would have threatened his royal justice if he had written with ink a pardon for his mother and posted it. No royal talk or exertion of royal power would have sufficed to explain such clemency. He therefore wrote the pardon, which love for his mother demanded, with blood, with his own blood. For his blood pronounced upon the mother he loved both judgment and grace.

This story makes clear how wrong it is to think that the cross of Christ is a matter of reconciling God with a bloody sacrifice. Neither the king in this story nor God are reconciled. They themselves are the reconcilers. But they did not simply wipe out the sin that needed to be forgiven, like an insignificant chalk mark. This would have made God's law, indeed, his outraged love itself, a trivial, insignificant thing. What matters is that men's consciences should be pricked and comforted at the same time. Only so can sin be not only forgiven, but really conquered.

At this point we must stop questioning, explaining, or even defending the message of the cross of Calvary. We shall not dispute with those who may reply that the king in the story must surely have been an Asiatic king and that the God who "cleanses us from all sin" through the blood of Jesus Christ is

also an Asiatic God who must see blood before he can forgive. Nor shall we argue with those who stand unmoved before the stake and look on as the king is flogged, without trembling at the thought that here their own sin is being condemned and expiated. Nor shall we quarrel with those who make of the cross of Golgotha no more than a system of words which can be found theologically correct or false. But to the man who really wants to penetrate and inwardly understand the mystery of the cross we should like to say, "Listen to the introit of Johann Sebastian Bach's *St. John's Passion* and make of it a personal prayer." Let him repeat these words as if they were his own: "Lord, our Redeemer, whose name in all the world is glorious, show us by thy Passion that thou, the true Son of God for evermore, art glorified even in the deepest humiliation."

The Resurrection of Jesus Christ

For many people the resurrection of Christ is nothing but an incredible legend. Couldn't we simply eliminate it and put the simple religion of the Sermon on the Mount in the center of the Christian faith? The church declares that the message of the resurrection is the foundation of its faith and that on no account can it be given up. Can a thinking person of the twentieth century take his stand on a foundation of faith that was laughed out of court even by the Athenian philosophers (Acts 17)?

Is Faith "Moonshine"?

We shall never get around the fact that without the resurrection our whole faith is "moonshine." Moonshine is perhaps better than total darkness. It illuminates the way, but it conceals the goal. It indicates outlines and forms, but it also begets specters. It produces comforting moods, but it pales in the sober light of day.

Is that the way it is with faith? Is that the way it is with God, the divine "Thou" who loves us, sustains us, saves us, and makes his demands upon us? Is faith a consolation for dark hours or is it that which holds firm when everything else totters and falls?

We know today that there is nothing, absolutely nothing in this world that is solid and secure. In every respect the world of the atomic age stands upon shaky ground. Can faith hold its own in a world like this?

Is God Faithful?

Faith is an illusion unless it has grounds for trusting in the

faithfulness of him in whom it believes. Faith does not rest upon external guarantees; these are just as unsure as gilt-edged stocks in a time of inflation. Faith is based upon the faithfulness of God which even death cannot change. Otherwise, it is craven self-delusion.

This and this alone is what the Christians flung into the faces of the tyrants who persecuted them, the philosophers who laughed at them, and the world that tempted them: "God is faithful!" God's love and loyalty, celebrated in psalms and songs, experienced in countless hearts, and verified in life, stands as the one thing dependable in the flux of events. This is the Christian affirmation. Does this affirmation have any dependable, credible foundation? There was one moment in history when this question was put in such a way that it could not be dismissed—in the darkness of Golgotha.

We ordinary, sinful men must admit that we cannot complain if the darkness of death surrounds the end of our life, for who of us is not obliged to confess that time and time again we ourselves have broken faith with God and betrayed his love for the sake of cheaper consolations? We cannot complain if God sets a limit to his patience and faithfulness and is constantly driving home to us through death the dubiousness of all human self-assertion.

But there was One, so the disciples of Jesus believed, with whom all this was totally different, because he clung unshakably to God in faithfulness and obedience unto death. That is why the disciples asked themselves, "How could death ever touch One who held stably and unwaveringly to God's goodness his whole life long?" And how hideously he died, amid the mocking laughter of all the powers of Satan! How can anyone possibly go on believing in the Father in heaven and his unchanging love if that is the end?

In our own times of world wars and mass murders countless thousands have cried out, "Is there no God in heaven?" None

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of these cries was uttered with such justification and such exigency as the bitter laments of the disciples who mourned the crucified Christ. If they had been left without an answer, all the glorious words of the New Testament, from the Sermon on the Mount to the "hymn of love" (I Corinthians 13), would long since have been gone with the wind, forgotten and outshone by the cold brilliance of belief in a pitiless fate.

The Dependability of the Witnesses

The despairing band of Jesus' disciples was not left without an answer. Their despair was transformed into victorious confidence. Trusting in the faithfulness of God that proves itself even in death, they marched with joyful faces through torture, derision, persecution, and martyrdom, because they had experienced something so overwhelming that it provided an unshakable foundation for their faith in God's power and faithfulness. They met the risen, living Christ!

True, even their Jewish contemporaries ridiculed this faith and said that surely the disciples must have stolen the body of Jesus in order to be able to assert that he was still living. But this argument is futile. The most that it can prove is that the Jews were obviously unable to produce the body of Jesus to disprove the resurrection. In the face of the first martyrs from among the circle of disciples, in the face of such joyful willingness to die as followers of Jesus, the perpetration of a pious fraud by the disciples of Jesus is inconceivable. It is absurd to doubt the personal integrity of the apostles, their *own* conviction that Jesus rose from the dead. Their confidence that the power, faithfulness, and love of God would save them after death had its unshakable foundation in their faith in the resurrection of Jesus. It was this confidence that gave them their courage to bear witness, their joy, and their readiness to die.

Nevertheless, we ask ourselves: "Were they not themselves victims of a delusion? How can their certainty become ours?"

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Where can we who are living now find a seal that will confirm for us the faithfulness of God beyond the darkness of death? Did God actually answer Christ's unshakable love of God with his own love? Did he respond to Christ's faithfulness with his own? Was Christ's saying, 'Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy' (Matt. 5:7) actually verified? Or did Christ remain in the grim darkness of death?"

Upon this question depends, not only our hope of eternal life, but our whole faith in the value of human personality. If God let Christ himself drop after he had fulfilled his purpose, who is to prevent men from doing the same with their fellow men? Let us not fool ourselves; when we face the cross of Golgotha we are facing an abyss in which all our so-called human and moral values sink into nothingness, if God has not given us a sign that beyond the abyss there shines the imperishable, creative power of the love of God.

The Unanimous Testimony: "He Lives"

If we examine the accounts of the evangelists we are naturally struck by the fact that they do not agree in every detail. For example, we can no longer determine who was the first to observe the appearance of the risen Christ. Nor did the church of the first century even attempt to harmonize these differences in the accounts. The various accounts of the resurrection were simply set down beside one another without raising any claim of infallibility for the memory or the statements of the individual witnesses. The multiplicity of the testimonies was in itself important to the first Christians. The oldest written account of the Easter event, which was set down about twenty years after Jesus' death by the apostle Paul (I Corinthians 15), pointed out to his readers that there were five hundred witnesses of the resurrection of Jesus, of whom the majority were still living and could be consulted. They were human witnesses. They claimed only human credibility and they stood ready to

subject themselves to the critical examination of their statements by the doubters in Corinth.

What are the essentials upon which all the statements of the witnesses to the resurrection agree? They all say that he, the crucified Jesus, was seen alive (Mark 16:9-14). He spoke with them (Luke 24:25); he overcame their doubts (John 20:27ff.); he forgave their unfaithfulness and renewed his fellowship with them (John 21:15ff.); and he ate with them (John 21:13).

We remain without an answer if we ask the witnesses how tangible, physical, or even objective were the appearances of Christ. For, on the one hand, we have an account of his passing through closed doors (John 20:19) and, on the other hand, the same evangelist reports that the risen Christ challenged doubting Thomas to put his finger into his wounds in order to cure Thomas of his doubts (John 20:27).

So for the disciples this was neither a wonderful reanimation of a sleeping body, as in the story of Lazarus (John 11:44), nor the appearance of a spirit (Luke 24:37). All of the disciples were convinced that here something totally new, the invasion of a new reality, had occurred. What the risen Christ had in common with the old physical existence of Jesus was that it was clearly he, he himself, his very person and being, truly the divine Lord, who stood before them again. But he was not recognized by his physical appearance (John 20:15; Luke 24:16; John 21:4), but by his words (Mark 16:14), by his breaking of bread with them (Luke 24:30-31), by his helpful act (John 21:4-6), and his wounds (John 20:27). They recognized him by the characteristic traits of a living person that shine from within a man, as it were through the window of an incomprehensible external manifestation. And therefore too only those saw the risen Christ who had a personal relationship of faith with him and thus were familiar with his real nature and being.

When we stand before the corpse of a loved one, we have the appalling feeling that this is not really he. We say of a dead person that his living being has fled. For those who experienced the resurrection of Jesus it was just the opposite. He himself, his living being, this "Thou" who met them in the depths of their hearts, the Saviour of their souls stood before them again. This is the clear and unanimous testimony of the disciples. The external impressions and memories the disciples had of the forms in which the risen Christ appeared to them and thus the impressions they had of his "resurrection body" were different. They were perhaps not expressible in ordinary language at all. But this certainty—"It is he; he lives!"—was shared by all the disciples, and for them it was convincing down to the day they died.

The Empty Grave

In the last century an external side of the resurrection account was made, so to speak, the mark of the orthodoxy of genuine Christians; this was the empty grave. To be sure, the empty grave is mentioned in all the Gospels (Matt. 28:6; Mark 16:6; Luke 24:3; John 20:5ff.). But it is expressly stated that it was not the emptiness of the grave that provided the foundation for the disciples' faith in the risen Lord (Mark 16:8; Luke 24:11; John 20:9, 13). The oldest account of the resurrection of Jesus (I Corinthians 15) does not mention the empty grave, though it does not deny it. Many interpreters are of the opinion that the detailed accounts of the events in and near the tomb of Jesus (especially the scenes involving the soldiers [Matt. 27:66–28:4]) are embellishing narratives of the later church. The resurrection of Jesus itself, they say, was not a physical process, but something that happened as a spiritual or "mythical, superhistorical" process in the hearts of the disciples. Already in the theology of the nineteenth century there were two opposing views. The orthodox made the accounts of the

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empty grave, which they considered the only objectively verifiable statements about the resurrection, the central message upon which faith rests. The liberals wanted to explain the resurrection of Jesus as an inner process of awakening faith in the hearts of the disciples in order to make it easier to believe. In both cases the attention of men was not directed to the point which is determinative for faith. The message of the New Testament culminates in the certainty that Jesus is not to be found among the dead but among the living, not in graves (either full or empty), and most certainly not in pious introspection. Faith in the living Christ comes into being in the living encounter of a renewed relationship of love with Christ (Luke 24:5ff.). The disciples testified, " *This Jesus* [not "our own hearts"] God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses" (Acts 2:32).

This old controversy concerning the empty grave ought therefore to be put aside. Nobody can ever prove or disprove that the grave of Jesus was empty. Nor is it essential to the hope of our own resurrection whether the particles and the material atoms of our body are transformed in the resurrection on the last day or whether our body is created anew by God. Likewise, faith in the risen Christ is not decided by the question of what happened to the material substance of his physical body, but rather by the question of what God did with Jesus himself—whether he let him drop or whether he raised him up to new, eternal life. Nor would it have helped our knowledge of the risen Christ one bit to have known him "from a human point of view" (II Cor. 5:16ff.) and to have seen him with our physical eyes. Even the disciples did not recognize the risen Lord by his physical form but rather by his personal being. It is no different today. We know him as the living, brotherly "Thou" as he touches our lifeless hearts with his redeeming "Do not be afraid" (Matt. 28:10), his questioning "Do you

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love me?" (John 21:17), with the gift of bread which he breaks to open our eyes (Luke 24:30-31).

We therefore should not think we are contributing to the defense of faith or historical truth when we agonize over some external side of the resurrection message of the Bible. The only thing that counts for our own faith is the question whether the Jesus who speaks to us in the Gospels and is known to us there meets us as a living, personal reality in our own real life. Only then will the witness of the disciples concerning the risen Lord be credible: " 'This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses' " (Acts 2:32).

The "Myth" of Christ's Descent Into Hell and Ascent Into Heaven

Many people are troubled by the question of what happens to those who have died without having accepted the saving message of Christ. Others wonder whether the rules of the Christian faith apply only to the devout company of disciples, but not to the world—the great world-embracing problems of business, politics, science, indeed, the whole cosmos. The ancient church gave some very definite answers to both of these questions. They were dealt with in the teaching of Christ's descent into hell and ascent into heaven in the Christian creeds. For the modern man the only difficulty consists in the fact that the ancient church expressed this faith in the mythical images of its own time which no longer conform to our present-day cosmology.

The superficial rationalist mind was inclined to relegate the message of Christ's descent into hell and ascent into heaven to the curiosity shop of the history of religions. It would be better to cleanse it of the dust of the centuries and let its message come alive for a new age in the language of today.

Myth in the Bible and in Science

In the last century there was a very superior kind of superstition. It was a faith in science that amounted to superstition. The fact that modern science gave us enormous, hitherto undreamed-of insights into the world of nature and the mind misled many people into believing that science actually would be able to take the place of faith. Above all, it was imagined that faith is a kind of preliminary stage that precedes science and art.

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The person who has reached this higher stage has outgrown the language of faith. Now he is in a situation where, instead of employing childish images, he can grasp reality itself and make it the object of human description. The creeds of the church were regarded as the mythological conceptions of a past age, the spiritual content of which must be lifted out and subjected to examination.

Meanwhile science itself has torn the web of superstition that had been spun around it and has recognized that the ultimate realities of existence can only be described in images, but not dealt with objectively. Therefore if we were to translate the language of the Bible in which it speaks of God and eternal things into the language of twentieth-century science, we should only be exchanging one picture language, one myth, for another. The idea that it is ever possible to demythologize the Christian faith is therefore probably a remnant of the false faith in science which science itself has already given up. Nevertheless, it must be clearly recognized that in many places the Bible does, in fact, speak in mythical language when it wishes to describe supersensual events.

Changing Cosmology and Changing Mythical Language

In our consideration of the Word of God and human speech we have already made it clear that every statement about God is a translation into the language and the thought world of a particular people in a particular time. This applies to the scientific world view of that time just as much as it does to its religious language. The Greek conception of the Logos as well as the biblical conceptions of heaven and hell are examples of this. But this applies in exactly the same way to the scientific, religious, and philosophical concepts of the twentieth century in so far as these concepts are meant to demonstrate and illustrate facts which are indemonstrable and thus make them intelligible to the people of our time.

The "Myth" of Christ's Descent Into Hell and Ascent Into Heaven

Having made these preliminary observations, we shall try to understand what the Christianity of the first century was trying to say when it confessed that Christ "descended into hell" and after his resurrection "ascended into heaven."

As is well known, in the time when the Bible was written mankind's conception of the world was one in which the earth was a disk above which the vault of heaven was stretched like a dome. Beneath the earth an underworld was thought to exist. This conception was linked in antiquity with the idea that there were gods of the heavens and gods of the underworld. The Bible too employed this cosmology when it wished to say that God and Satan, good and evil, the blessed and the damned are separated from each other by a great gulf (Luke 16:26). The scientific and religious mythical conceptions of that time are still apparent today in the church's theological language and pictorial representations. Pictorial representations of the Last Judgment still make use of the distinction between above (heaven) and below (hell) to represent the separation that will one day be made among mankind.

Around the middle of the second millennium of the Christian era man's scientific conception of the world was changed by the discoveries of Copernicus and the great circumnavigators of the globe. This also knocked the bottom out of the mythological conception of an "upper" and a "lower" locality. What happened then was what always happens in the history of faith when men confuse the figurative terms of their religious language with the content of faith itself. There were theologians and laymen who feared that the new Copernican cosmology would destroy the Christian hope of eternity. In reality they had overlooked the fact that even the writers of Holy Scriptures had already partially realized that heaven and hell were not names of places but that they indicated spiritual, personal nearness to or remoteness from God.

The Bible's Picture Language of Heaven and Hell

Many writers in the Old and the New Testament were aware of the fact that the language of faith speaks in a mythical, transcendental sense when it speaks of heaven and hell, of God's going up or coming down from heaven, or of the earth as his footstool. It is true that there are many passages in the Bible in which, as in the speech of children, the sky and God's heaven are the same thing. In the Old Testament story of the tower of Babel the Lord "came down to see the city and the tower, which the sons of men had built" (Gen. 11:5). But even in his time King Solomon had enunciated the biblical faith in the omnipresence of God, and therefore he prayed at the dedication of his temple, "'Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain thee; how much less this house which I have built!'" (I Kings 8:27).

To biblical narrators and psalmists God in person is inescapably present everywhere:

"Whither shall I go from thy Spirit?

Or whither shall I flee from thy presence?

If I ascend to heaven, thou art there!

If I make my bed in Sheol, thou art there!

If I take the wings of the morning

and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,

even there thy hand shall lead me,

and thy right hand shall hold me" (Ps. 139:7-10).

The Old and New Testament believers quite unconcernedly asserted both the loftiness and the remoteness of him "who dwells in heaven" and the continuing, immediate presence of him in whom "we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). Accordingly, centuries ago the theologians of classical Protestant Orthodoxy said with regard to Christ's descent into hell that it "was true and real and yet the motion was not

The "Myth" of Christ's Descent Into Hell and Ascent Into Heaven physical or local, but supernatural." To the now outmoded kind of thinking for which the only things that are "true and real" are those that are external and objectively perceivable, this statement of the older theologians must necessarily seem absurd. The fact is, however, that it only reveals the difficulty to which our language is always exposed when it is obliged to speak about things that lie beyond our sentient power of imagination. We shall try therefore, as best we can, to describe in present-day language what the ancients were asserting when they confessed their faith in the descent of Christ into hell.

The Comfort of the Message of Christ's Descent Into Hell

The Christian church believes that it was not only to the living that God revealed himself, as he appeared personally in the man Jesus Christ. God in his goodness condescended even farther and went to meet those who had already died. Everything that God's love does for us who are living when we experience the goodness and the majesty of God in the proclamation of Jesus or in the reception of his sacraments God did not withhold from those who had already entered the realm of the dead. Thus Peter writes to the first Christians: "For Christ also died, . . . being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit; in which he went and preached to the spirits in prison, who formerly did not obey. . . . For this is why the gospel was preached even to the dead, that though judged in the flesh like men, they might live in the spirit like God" (I Pet. 3:18-20; 4:6).

The myth of Christ's descent into hell is therefore not a fable or a legend invented by some poet. It is the expression of a conviction of faith which was held by the first Christians. They considered it unthinkable that the rule of God's love which appeared in Christ should extend only to those people whom Jesus Christ met either in person or through the message proclaimed by his disciples.

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It is true that God "did not leave himself without witness" even among the pagan peoples. Paul said to the Lycaonians, "'He did good and gave you from heaven rains and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness'" (Acts 14:17). But God's love did not meet the pagans "in person," as Jesus Christ met the Christians. No man, living or dead, is deprived of the opportunity to make a decision in confrontation with the love of God in person. This is the substance of faith in the creed's article concerning Christ's descent into hell.

When we stop to reflect about this, we see that here in this mythical language of the ancients we are given a message which is absolutely indispensable to countless people today, if they are not to go wrong about God. Think of the countless mothers whose sons grew up in a godless time and then, before they were able to fully grasp the reality of Christ, were snatched away in the prime of youth. Or think of the pathetic, fear-ridden cults of pagan peoples, whose religious zeal very often puts us to shame. The belief that the spirit of Christ offered fellowship with God, peace, and forgiveness also to those who had long since fallen asleep was very important to the first Christians. This faith was an expression of their love for all the people of the pagan world. And it was rooted in the certainty that this love for the pagan world was in accord with God's will.

Faith in Christ's Assumption of Power

What we have said also applies to faith in Christ's ascension into heaven, with the difference that this belief is based not only upon a conclusion of faith drawn by the primitive church but also upon the disciples' experience of their last encounter with the risen Christ. In that experience the disciples were given the assurance that Christ would go on working in the world and would establish the dominion of God. Now he was "with God" and that meant that God was no longer a remote and

The "Myth" of Christ's Descent Into Hell and Ascent Into Heaven unapproachable God from whose presence the sinner must flee. Now the Saviour, who received the sinner with unimaginable patience and love, was "a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make expiation for the sins of the people" (Heb. 2:17).

The final experience of encounter between the disciples and the risen Christ made this assurance of Christ's dominion over all the world final, settled, and certain, so that the disciples never lost this certainty even to the hour of martyrdom. The external form which this final meeting with the risen Christ took, however, is variously described in the Gospels. In Matthew there is only the report that the risen Christ came to the disciples and said these words: "'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age'" (Matt. 28:18-20). In Mark the same commission of the risen Christ to his disciples is recorded in somewhat different form and concluded with the sentence, "So then the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of God" (Mark 16:19). The Saviour of mankind thus entered, so to speak, into chancellorship with God, as was promised in Psalm 110:1. Only in the Book of Acts, which was written by Luke, a Greek physician and disciple of Paul, do we have a description of the *external* event of the ascension: "And when he had said this, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight" (Acts 1:9). One may confidently leave unsettled the question whether this more detailed description of the event of the ascension is an elaboration which sprang later from the imagination of the Christian congregations or whether it is based on accounts given by the disciples themselves. In any case, the substance of the Christian faith is not

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the conception, based on the ancient mythical view of the world, that the body of the risen Christ rose up into the air until it disappeared in a cloud. The substance of faith in the ascension of Christ is the assurance that the course of history and our personal destiny is governed by the merciful hands of him who on the cross established the power of God's sacrificial love in the world.

Blessed Work in the Service of Christ's Kingdom

Anybody who tries to confine this power of love to the private sphere of pious families violates the Christian faith. Nobody can count on the fruitfulness and lastingness of his worldly work who forgets that the King of love rules the whole world and determines the temporal and eternal value of all human work. Wherever in business the thought of service is crowded out by interest in profit, wherever in politics the desire for power stifles willingness to come to mutual understanding and mutual concession, wherever in art the applause of the crowd becomes more important than the praise of God's creation—wherever any of this happens it has been forgotten that the supreme Employer, Christ, rejects such work and condemns it to failure. The faith that Christ "sits at the right hand of God" liberates us from the sheeplike thinking that extends no farther than the grass tuft of the nearest success. In this faith all straining after effect is overcome and the way is opened to those goods which are found only by those who do not seek them for their own profit.

Ascension Day is therefore a day of blessing or of judgment upon all the working people in this world. Here is revealed the ultimate bearing point on which all human work must be aligned if it is to be successful. Every human service, whether it be labor in an industrial plant or loving service to suffering people, whether it be the creative work of an artist or the edu-

The "Myth" of Christ's Descent Into Hell and Ascent Into Heaven
cational work of a mother—all this can accomplish good only
as it is transcended, directed toward eternal love.

The ultimate fulfillment, freedom, and hope in the toil of
our earthly work will not be found in the service and praise
of men. We find it in responding to the apostle's challenge,
"Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name
of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through
him" (Col. 3:17).

The Royalty of Grace

All that we have said is not meant in an intolerant sense,
as if all human work that is not consciously and directly per-
formed as a Christian act should be despised. This misunder-
standing is often encountered when the church declares its
belief in the universal lordship of Christ. But, quite to the con-
trary, this belief affirms that the God of love revealed in Christ
embraces and animates all who do not live for themselves, but
humbly wait for the goodness of God and in this attitude pre-
sent to God the service of their lives. Many a sacrificial service
performed by men who may be far away from the church is
therefore closer to the ascended Christ than the kind of self-
satisfied "Christianity" that thinks it has a corner on the grace
of God but does not allow that "Christianity" to move the
heart to helpful deeds. Jesus himself makes this very clear in
the Sermon on the Mount and his discourse on the Last Judg-
ment (Matt. 25:31-46).

Hence there is such a thing as an unconscious service of
love to Christ, of which one day the Judge of the world will
say, "'As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren,
you did it to me'" (Matt. 25:40). On this judgment of eternal
love upon our earthly toil depends the meaning of our whole
life and work. This is the content of the message of Ascension
Day.

Faith and Superstitious Faith in the Return of Christ

Everybody knows that human society goes to ruin when its members cease to recognize any higher moral obligations than those that are connected with the payment of their salaries or gaining some other advantages in community life. In the two-thousand-year-old history of Christian peoples the return of Christ as the Judge of the world has always been the highest point of reference to which human responsibility related itself. Many medieval cathedrals are adorned with symbols related to this belief. Is it possible for us moderns to continue relating our moral responsibility to this event at the end of history? If we can, then the question of what we know about this final event in human history takes on a tremendous practical interest. What we need here is to distinguish very carefully between the airy figments of fanatical fantasy and the sober expectations of a faith that is grounded in God.

But there is still another question that remains. Will God's world remain forever incomplete, both good and evil? Where shall we find something in which there is no worm of evil and death? Will things always be this way, with no hope of anything perfect? Someday there must be a showdown that will prove who is Lord; otherwise everything is purposeless and the "god of chance" has the last word.

Has the Redeemer of the World Already Come?

In my student days I witnessed a dramatic meeting between leading thinkers of the Jewish community in Germany and a number of Christian theologians. After the theologians had

stated and explained why the Christian church believes that Jesus was the Messiah promised in the Old Testament, a brilliant representative of the other side sprang up and passionately confronted them with this question: "In a world that is so filled with hideous misery and suffering how can you say that the Redeemer, the Messiah, the Saviour of the world has already come?"

This objection had already been raised in Jesus' lifetime, and it was raised with a vengeance after his death on the cross; for, after all, when in the name of God the Messiah establishes the rule of God over the world, then surely injustice and violence must vanish from the world. Jesus himself gave a twofold answer to this question.

On the one hand, Jesus pointed out that the kingdom of God is already present, that it is in the midst of men, indeed, within us. He said, "The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed; nor will they say, 'Lo, here it is! or 'There!' for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you" (Luke 17:20-21). Whoever believes in Christ and through him has been inwardly won to God has already been received into this kingdom of eternal love which, like a field of grain, is ripening toward the harvest.

Now, however, the wheat in the field is still mixed with weeds. Both the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan grow up beside each other. But the day of harvest will come, when the weeds will be burned and the wheat gathered into the barn (Matt. 13:30). And that, says Christ on the other hand, is the day when he will come again to demand an accounting from all men and to assign thanks or punishment. The work and worship of the primitive church, the letters of the apostles, the church's liturgies and prayers—all of them are filled with this expectation. This hope is like the expectation of a bride who adorns herself for the joy of her betrothed. It is also comparable to human work which aims at the hour

when its results will be established. It was the expectation of the return of Christ that gave to the primitive church its inner tension and dynamic. Without expectation, there is in human life neither the will to accomplish nor the power to love. Every human task and the responsibility for its fulfillment is related to the coming and the coming again of him who has the final, deciding word.

The Fight for Reserved Seats

The fact is, however, that right from the beginning this expectation of the return of Christ has been at the same time an object of the wildest kind of human fantasy. Even while he was still living, Jesus was obliged to set himself against the curiosity of those who, instead of devoting all their strength to preparing themselves for that hour, engaged in excited speculations about its possible date (Matt. 24:36). Thousands upon thousands of people have been led astray by such wild calculations and speculations. In the face of this phenomenon in his own day, Martin Luther is supposed to have said that if he knew that tomorrow was the Day of Judgment he would busy himself today with paying his debts and planting an apple tree. In a factory it is never a good sign of the high quality of the workers when they are too much concerned about when the boss is coming. People who know that they are secure in the love of Christ and let this determine their lives in this world know that for them, as for any cashier, what counts is to be ready *at all times* for the accounting (Luke 21:36). Close attention to the accounts, to see that they tally and are balanced every day by the love of God, liberates them from a nervous prying into the hidden plans of God.

It is not in accord with the spirit of Christ to think that the Christian life can be compared with people fighting to get reserved seats at an entertainment. Many people join religious splinter groups because they are alleged to have first call on

eternal life. If one desires to participate in these peculiar prerogatives, there may be certain cultic prescriptions or certain foods and days that must be avoided or observed (Col. 2:16ff.). Convinced that they have secured a unique, preferred place, these groups then attempt to inspire fear in others. They seek to persuade them that when the Lord comes everyone who has not procured the privilege they have procured will be left standing outside the door.

Doctrines of this kind, which are generally based upon passages of Scripture which have been torn out of their context, are a distortion of the biblical image of God. The sacrifice of God's love on the cross of Golgotha is thus misunderstood and emptied of its meaning. Right from the beginning, the apostles passionately opposed these movements. Paul said to those who allowed themselves to be impressed by such false teachings: "Let me ask you only this: . . . Having begun with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh?" (Gal. 3:3). This fighting for reserved seats in heaven is completely alien to the spirit of the love of Christ and the laws of his kingdom. The children in the kingdom of God live by God's goodness and grace; they do not need reserved seats. The scramble for reserved seats they leave to those who think they can escape the terrors of his return by the scrupulous performance of peculiar, special precepts.

Will Man Play Out the Play to the End?

Contrasted with these excited human efforts not to miss out on the return of Christ are the opposite kind of deviations from the church's teaching. In these deviations there is no expectation at all of Christ's return. Here the fulfillment of the kingdom of God is no longer an intervention of God which will put an end to the evil and suffering of this world and inaugurate a new and better world. According to this view, hope in such an intervention of God at the end of history is

only a mythological conception of the ancients. The fulfillment of God's rule is, rather, a long, continuing social process. Those who follow this "social gospel" no longer expectantly direct their thinking toward the end of all things but rather to the present day, in order that all men may live together here and now in brotherhood under the fatherhood of God.

Actually, this seemingly very sober and realistic religiosity puts God himself right out of the center of history. Here man himself plays out the play to the end. It turns out, however, that he cannot do this. If a man has nothing in the beyond to which he can orient himself, nothing to look forward to, and nothing to which he is ultimately responsible, then this has some very real implications for his everyday life.

The person who has ahead of him an eternal expectation, who knows that after death he will be received into the loving arms of God, can be happy and confident even when immediate success in his struggle for the good in the world is denied him. Of course, like every honest person, he will throw himself into a good cause and strive to accomplish something useful. But he knows that even when he suffers injustice, even utter failure—as Christ himself did—he is not lost. The sight of the cross, back of which lies the resurrection, gives to the believing Christian the courage even to leap into the dark where no success beckons. But this ability to disregard immediate success is frequently the prerequisite for the first step in the accomplishment of great human achievements, most of all in the area of social life. Every community lives by the fact that there are people in it who are willing to make sacrifices even when they will not be thanked for it, perhaps even when there is no prospect of success for their efforts. As soon as man outgrows merely instinctive action and must make decisions according to his own knowledge, he needs a target in the infinite toward which he can direct his actions. Such a target is the coming again of Christ, which means the day on which, as the Bible puts it,

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the books will be opened (Dan. 7:10) and every man will reap what he has sown (Gal. 6:7). Otherwise, everyday life gets lost in pragmatism and the scramble for efficiency and production.

The Parable of the Talents must never be deleted from the Bible. This parable of Jesus (Matt. 25:14-30) can no longer be told, however, if the Lord who distributed the talents to his servants is never going to return, if the greatest venture of all, the sacrifice of one's own life, is going to end in the night of death because there is nothing—no thanks, no life—that comes after it. Christians wait for the day when he whom they love and whom they serve will say to them, " 'Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much; enter into the joy of your master' " (Matt. 25:23). The man who has no expectation of hearing this answer is answerable only to himself or, at most, to the community. Such an alteration of Christian teaching has the same effect as removing the spring from a clock and thus eliminating its inner tension and life. A faith from which the Christian expectation has been removed also contradicts the very nature of the love of God. The love of God does not simply sow its gifts broadcast; it addresses itself to the individual, singles him out, and makes him a partner of God's eternal goodness. When man has no hope and expectation of the end, he ultimately becomes nothing more than fertilizer for social progress.

Face to Face with God Himself

The first Christians were not content with the general statement that after this life there would be some kind of divine judgment. They knew that God himself had looked into their faces through the eyes of Jesus, that through God's reflected image, Jesus, they had spoken to God himself. They knew that God had not let this Jesus fall, but had given him a new life. Therefore they were convinced that, when this world ends and

the judgment day of God comes, they would again face the One in whom they met the love of God here on earth. On that day in eternal life we shall have to answer, not to Kant's categorical imperative, or a textbook of ethics, or even the letters of the Bible, but the eternal, personal love of God. This responsibility either leads to reunion of those who have lived for one another or it ends in the very simple question, "Why did you not love this eternal Love?"

The Terror of Judgment

In the Middle Ages the Last Judgment was depicted with vigorous and colorful imagination. Every representation of human torture that men could think of was incorporated by the painters and poets into their pictures of hell. But they too were aware that these were only pictures of what is ultimately unimaginable. Back of these pictures, which Dante presented so vividly in his *Divine Comedy*, there lies a profound thought. The person who scorns the love of God in his life or considers something else more important will be condemned in eternity to remain forever with what he has preferred to the love of God. The day of Christ's return is therefore not the moment in which God's love suddenly veers around and turns into an infernal hatred against all those who have not believed in him. If this were so, then man could defy and assert himself against God forever, like Prometheus chained to the rock. The everlasting judgment which Christians contemplate is something far more dreadful. There man is helplessly delivered over to the judgment of the love of God for eternity and yet is separated from that love. For God does not force his love upon anybody, even in eternity. Those who despise it are condemned to man-age without it.

It is completely futile to attempt to arrive at detailed conceptions of what happens in eternity. All speculation about what it will be like in eternal life are poetic figments of the imagina-

tion. We Christians know only one thing for certain and that is that on the other shore eternal love awaits us. It is a terrible thing to know that at his coming we shall be awaited and welcomed by loving eyes and at the same time to know that we have something within us that, when it is revealed, will separate us from those eyes forever. For those who must stand unreconciled before those eyes of love they become flames of fire that consume them.

The Eternal Kingdom of Christ

The eternal kingdom of Christ is not a life in which only two are concerned—the soul and God. It is also the consummation of the church. According to the hope of the Christian church, it is not only the fellowship of God and individual men, which is so sadly broken in this world, that will be perfected in the life to come. The whole community of men who have lived by God's grace and given themselves to the church will be cleansed of that which divides and poisons it. That which is held together here on earth only with difficulty and sometimes not without compulsion and force will—so Christianity hopes—be ruled from within in eternal life and be led to unity by reason of the fact that Christ, the King of Love, will rule over the world. Referring to Christ, the sacrificial Lamb, the Book of Revelation says of this reign, "The Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water; and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes" (Rev. 7:17). The disintegrative power of death will also vanish with the coming again of Christ and the re-creation of this world. All disruption, despair, and fear of death will be removed from the world (Rev. 21:4) when the power of the love of God which was revealed in Christ has conquered and God "has put all his enemies under his feet." Then all government and rule by force in this world will be unnecessary; they will be abolished be-

God in the Son of Man, Jesus Christ

cause God himself will be everything to everyone (I Cor. 15:24-28).

The Christian church sees in this rule of Christ the goal of history. All human activity tends toward the day when it will be consummated. All human kingdoms and sovereignties—whether they be great or small, political, economic, or ecclesiastical—will then prove whether and to what degree they have either prepared or blocked the way for this rule of true community and genuine love.

Is All This Utopian?

All the dreams of men who think that human efforts will succeed in establishing such a rule of peace, nonviolence, and love are utopian. All such utopias fail to take into account the reality of human sinfulness, which always turns the best social orders into their reverse. But faith that it is possible for God to break the power of corruption and evil in this world is not utopian, unless it be said that any faith at all in a divine Creator and Lord of the world is simply a delusion constructed from human longings. This is not the place to decide the issues raised by such fundamental doubt. The person who in his life has gained the certainty that he can trust the goodness of God knows that the return of Christ is not an empty dream. He is certain that all the goodness and love which God's Spirit daily pours out upon this world is only the first down payment upon the glory of a perfect world to come.

The Second Article of the Common Creeds of the Christian Church

I believe in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord,
Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, Born of
the Virgin Mary,

Suffered under Pontius Pilate, Was crucified, dead,
and buried:

He descended into hell; The third day he rose
again from the dead; He ascended into heaven, And
sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Al-
mighty;

From thence he shall come to judge the quick
and the dead. —*The Apostles' Creed*

I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-
begotten Son of God,

Begotten of his Father before all worlds,

God of God, Light of Light, Very God of very
God,

Begotten, not made,

Being of one substance with the Father,

By whom all things were made:

Who for us men, and for our salvation, came
down from heaven,

And was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Vir-
gin Mary,

And was made man;

And was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate.

He suffered and was buried;

And the third day he rose again according to the
Scriptures,

And ascended into heaven, And sitteth on the
right hand of the Father.

And he shall come again with glory to judge both
the quick and the dead:

Whose kingdom shall have no end. —*The Nicene Creed*

PART THREE

The Spirit of Life in God

The Spirit of Freedom

The most horrible despotisms of history have come into being in the name of freedom, and they have again been struck down in the name of freedom. This need not surprise us, for men have always thought that freedom consists in release from bonds of any kind. But man is never alone in the world. In order to live he is constantly dependent upon others, indeed, upon his Creator. Therefore freedom without restraint necessarily means freedom for one and slavery for the others. No one can be free from the necessity of consideration of the wishes of others as long as he is dependent upon them, unless he subjects them to every caprice of his will.

A paradisaal dream of humanity would be fulfilled if the tormenting circle of the deliverance and enslavement of man were ever to cease. The church's doctrine of the Holy Spirit is an answer to the question whether and how this dream can come true.

Freedom Without Commitment

"I might just as well go into a monastery," said a young man when he was invited to become a Christian. He was afraid that being a Christian might be inconsistent with many things which he was not willing to give up. And the fact is, of course, that if being a Christian has something to do with the Holy Spirit, then becoming a Christian also has something to do with separation from what is unholy, with the renunciation of sin.

Whenever we talk about sin, people today always think of pleasures which are forbidden by the doctor and the minister.

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How can a man be free when he is literally surrounded with prohibitions? How, then, can the Holy Spirit, who forbids us to sin, be a Spirit of freedom? Such questions only make it clear that some catastrophic misunderstanding concerning the content of the Christian message and the meaning of sin are abroad today. Here we must go back to Adam and Eve to set this matter straight.

In the story of the fall the serpent sought to convince man that only man, like God, was free to do what he wished and therefore to take and enjoy what God had forbidden. Only he would be as God—a free lord of all things.

Man's experience with this "spirit of freedom," which comes from the evil one, is plain to see. The end of it is not the possession of divine sovereignty but the experience of the first human couple: "They knew that they were naked" (Gen. 3:7). That is to say, the end result of freedom robbed from God is disillusionment, the necessity of being ashamed, the shattering of the illusion of freedom, the knowledge of human helplessness and lostness. Freeing oneself from God never leads to fulfillment and freedom, but always, in the end, to emptiness and nothingness.

The Yearning for Authority

Many persons and peoples, who have had these negative experiences with freedom, therefore seek shelter from the perils of freedom in submission to an authoritarian sovereignty of God, the church, or the state. Why, they ask, were men condemned to freedom, though they are utterly incapable of coping with it? Would not life be at its finest if it were like a Cook's tour, in which everything from meal tickets to sight-seeing were arranged beforehand in the best way possible? This is what many imagine paradise and heaven to be. And their conception of the role of the Holy Spirit in the spiritual liberation of the human race is similar. They think that when a

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person is filled with the Holy Spirit, this is like building an automatic remote control into a machine. When a person receives the Holy Spirit, from then on he is freed from fear and temptation because in his thinking and acting he is completely controlled by the Spirit of God.

God does not want to treat men like well-fed domestic animals. He wants them to grow up into the full freedom of decision worthy of the sons of the family. Therefore the Holy Spirit disappoints all human desires for moral automation. If they do not wish to abandon such wishes, they will have to make for themselves a god who will relieve them of the burden of making their own decisions, of doing their own thinking, and thus of the perilous venture of being a free human being. There are plenty of religious and political institutions in the world which offer such "planned tours" through life. But the apostle Paul says, "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (II Cor. 3:17). What he has in view is a kind of freedom quite different from that of a modern planned vacation. And the reason for this is that he believes in a Lord who rules by freeing men.

Freedom and Commitment Combined in Love

This may perhaps appear to us to be a strange contradiction because we think that the essence of all rulership is that it takes away the freedom of those it rules. But there is a form of rulership that finds its fulfillment in the very fact that it completely frees men. This is the rule of genuine, sacrificial love. It is a contradiction of the very nature of love to desire to force those on whom it is bestowed to do anything against their will. Least of all does it wish to compel another to respond with love. Forced love is worthless. And yet love produces a strong, nay, an absolute bond, which can never be achieved by

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any domination by force, because it binds not from without but from within, not through compulsion but through being inwardly won.

Only love binds and frees fully at the same time, because for the one who loves bondage is deliverance, joy, and fulfillment. One who feels that love is a fetter has lost love and must seek it afresh. We cannot compel another person to love; he cannot even force himself to love. He must open his heart again and receive it from others; only then is it genuine, radiant, animating, liberating, and binding for him and for others.

Anybody who knows life knows that this power of love is constantly faltering in men's lives. Often, especially in modern mass society, it looks as if only armed violence, money, or some other human instrument of power has any prospect of success. In the long run even the strongest human love cannot stand up to these realities. Is there any use at all in indulging in these wishful dreams about a world in which genuine love rules?

More clearly than any philosophy, the Christian faith sees these depressing realities. That is why it says that we belong to a "fallen creation," a world which no longer lives in the original ordinances of God. The Christian faith, however, imparts the hope that God's love will finally gain the victory.

This certainty was born in the hearts of the disciples of Jesus out of the experiences of Good Friday and Easter. And this faith became a moving, revolutionizing power in human hearts, in congregations, churches, and nations. Faith in the victory of God's love turned a miserable group of Galilean fishermen into a spiritual world power. By that we do not mean the outward power and the secular influence of the church as an earthly institution. We mean the Spirit of love and of faith which, through the message of the church, has become a moral power in this world.

This world power is something totally different from the

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power of an idea. It is not the idea but the fact of love, not an emotional upwelling of love but its constantly working power that can still the thirst of empty hearts and stir up the strength to make joyful sacrifices. At most the Fata Morgana of unachievable moral ideals can lead men astray; it cannot animate them to do that which is good. Only a wave of love that flows from God can awaken and constantly reawaken those energies which, even in our modern world, create the situations for true freedom.

The Spirit and Enthusiasm

The animating and binding Spirit of love is something totally different from enthusiasm for a person, a program, or a party. Genuine enthusiasm is something natural and beautiful, like young people head over heels in love. Young spiritual movements often have in them much of this natural energy of enthusiasm and therefore they also have about them that captivating lack of logic and critical sense that is characteristic of people who are in love. These movements ought therefore not to be cursed. But they also ought not to imagine that the exuberance of their spiritual emotion and the verve of their first love is the decisive and highest thing to which the Holy Spirit calls and empowers men. There is a deeper and, above all, a more enduring love than "being in love." Likewise, there is a power of the love of God that moves, sustains, binds, and liberates a person even though it may no longer be so exuberant as it was in the first days of young Christendom.

We must not expect from churches and spiritual movements which have stood for decades, centuries, and millenniums the same forms of expression of love and the Holy Spirit as we might from young, spontaneous movements which are carried along in their first love by the fire of enthusiasm. We must not forget that the loyal love we find in mature persons, tested in the depressing humdrum of everyday life and clung to despite

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toil and temptation, exhibits no smaller degree of genuine human love. The same applies to the manifestations of the Holy Spirit in the history of the church. We ought not to kill with old-fogy talk the power in young movements in the church which have been inspired by the first fire of faith. But we should also not despise the old, gray mother church because the Spirit of God's love is at work in her in forms that are different from those of the first decade of her history.

It is not at all certain that the patience and loyalty of many simple Christians and many unknown preachers of the gospel may not be channeling far more moving, strengthening, comforting, and sustaining power into the world than the storms of enthusiasm which are set off by new movements.

The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of the love of God. It reflects itself in human hearts in many different forms. Long patience, even with faithless children, is one of these forms in which love expresses itself. The fervor of missionary passion in fighting to win them is another form. The innermost being of the church, nay, the deepest being of God, may manifest itself in both forms.

Becoming a Person Through the Person of God's Spirit

The worst error to which the Holy Spirit is exposed, particularly in our own age, probably is the tendency to identify the Spirit with the fanatical madness of mass hysteria. There are many who know the technique for evoking such phenomena. It is constantly being practiced in the political field as well as the religious. Certain manifestations of the so-called pentecostal movement appear to be a sign of the times. It is well known that there are great masses of people who are no longer able to distinguish between sexuality and love. We should therefore not be surprised that many are also unable to distinguish between the moving Power that was at work in the preaching

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of the apostle Peter on the first Pentecost and the techniques of the religious mass hypnotists who are springing up all over the world today.

Such misidentifications were common long ago in the great cities of the ancient Romans. The Christianity of the first century was even then confronted with the task of defining the nature of the Holy Spirit in order to ward off the false spirits. The Christians therefore had to declare unitedly that the Holy Spirit is not merely an impression of power that emanates from God like the contagious power of a fascinating orator or even the profound thoughts of a book which we read. The Holy Spirit is a person in the Godhead itself. Just as accurately we can say that the Holy Spirit is "God himself in person." Wherever the Holy Spirit is at work, God himself is present in person. When the Christian church sang the ancient hymn on Pentecost, "*Veni, creator spiritus* [Come, Creator Spirit]," it prayed that the divine "Thou" himself would meet our human selves, liberate them from the prison of their isolation, guilt, and selfishness, and lead them out into freedom and service.

Thus when we meet the Holy Spirit we are meeting the person of God himself. When we are gripped by a spiritual emotion this emotion is a motion of the Holy Spirit only if at the same time it confronts us with God in personal responsibility and thus makes us responsible persons. *This* is what is at stake when the church declares its faith that the Holy Spirit is God in person or the third person of the Godhead. This is what was meant when the church formulated the words of the Nicene Creed, "I believe in the Holy Ghost, The Lord." Being filled with the Holy Spirit means that through this meeting with the God who loves him an inwardly driven human being is made into an inwardly free, responsible person.

The Triune, Personal God

It was thus in the doctrinal controversies of the first cen-

turies, in which the church was compelled to ward off misunderstandings about the sonship of Jesus and the nature of the Holy Spirit, that the doctrine of the triune God came into being. This doctrine, of course, has nothing to do with a belief in three Gods. All it means to say is that God becomes known to us in three forms of personal being. The theologians of that time said that it is true that the Godhead consists of one substance but in three persons. The Latin word *persona* means "a mask." Originally it meant the character or role of an actor and also the personal essence of a man. This manner of speaking of three divine persons must therefore be understood in the light of the language of that time. Much in it is very difficult for us to understand today. But what the church at that time was concerned to safeguard is the faith that it is *God himself in person* who is at work: (1) as the creative and sustaining Spirit from the beginning of the world; (2) as a loving and self-revealing person in the life of Jesus Christ; (3) as the awakening and comforting power of the love of God in the present.

Christians, when they meet with the inexplicable operations of God in this world, do not merely believe in divine forces, divine thoughts, or divine emotions; they believe in God himself in person when they encounter his works. God himself in his freedom, majesty, and love always meets us men in person. One can therefore pray to the "Father in heaven," to the "Lord Jesus," or to the "Holy Spirit"; it is always the same God, who meets us in different forms and different ways in which his being operates.

The theologians then went farther in their thinking about the triunity of God and speculated on what the eternal God was doing in his solitude before the creation of the world. Not all of them gave the joking answer of the theologian who said that God spent that time cutting rods for inquisitive questioners. Others took this question more seriously and main-

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tained that the God of love could not have existed in solitude, since love always presupposes a partner. Therefore from eternity God existed in the trinity of Father, Son, and Spirit.

The Social Significance of the Trinity

Many people think that this article of faith in the triune God must be abandoned because today it is hardly intelligible and does not appear in the New Testament at all in this sharply defined formulation. They say that it is simply empty, antiquated dogmatism to go on clinging to it in this day and age. It seems to me that they are deluding themselves. Since the days of ancient Rome there probably has never been a time when the confession of the triune, personal God has been more needed than in our own time. The whole human situation cries out for the things of the spirit, for love, and for willingness to sacrifice. But more and more it is forgotten that these forces are rooted in the mystery of the person of God himself. They cannot be produced in a sociological test tube and then distributed through modern human-relations institutes. Nor can they be set in motion by any tricks and dodges of the democratic rules of the game. The apparatus of human social relations becomes inhuman when it is not motivated by the power of living, human hearts which have been awakened to become persons. But ultimately this "becoming a person" occurs in the meeting of a people with the person of God. It is precisely our time, which is constantly tempted to make of the Spirit a technically utilizable, politically useful commodity or power, that must be unceasingly reminded that the Spirit of freedom is rooted in the mystery of the person and that the mystery of the person is rooted in responsibility before the mystery of the triune God.

This is not to say that the efforts of modern industry, social agencies, and political science, which are endeavoring to make effective in modern life those forces which are personal and

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which bind people together, are not serious and praiseworthy efforts, even though they do not speak the language of Christian dogmatics. The power of personal love can and must make use of the instruments of technology, not only in hospitals but also in the mammoth organizations of the modern social structure. If the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of love, is to be carried into all sections of modern mass society, into factories, offices, labor unions, parliaments, communities, nations, and communities of nations, this requires that people must learn to bring effective help in a technical and organizational sense for the inner healing of this social structure. In this area Christianity still faces new, unconquered tasks in which it has much to learn from non-Christians also.

But already it is becoming apparent how tremendously important it is for the whole social structure, and thus for the future of mankind, what view of personality—or, let us put it more bluntly—what kind of belief in God it is that motivates those who operate and serve the technics of the social order. This question determines whether these social structures are held together by the Spirit of freedom or whether other integrating principles are determinant in them. The spirit of Allah, the inflexible despot whom Mohammed proclaimed, and the mild, hazy wisdom of the Hindus and Chinese will produce forms of community life completely different from those of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, in whom the person of the triune God calls the man who faces him as a person into the community of love and freedom. It is doubtful whether a liberal democracy which is founded upon the idea of partnership between the rulers and the ruled can ever become completely at home among a people whose attitude to their God is one of fatalistic submission. One can hardly combine absolute dictatorship in religion with liberal democracy in politics, unless—as is very largely the case in the Eastern world today—one derives

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one's moral standards in politics from sources beyond those of one's own faith.

It may be, of course, that what is happening in the history of nations is an illustration of what Jesus meant in his parable of the two sons who were called by their father to work in his vineyard. One of them replied, " 'I will not'; but afterward he repented and went" (Matt. 21:29). What Jesus was saying was that the pagan world, which at first said "no" to God, is perhaps closer to God than the believers who say a "yes" and *do* a "no." It is altogether possible that the peoples of the West, and the Christians among them, may one day be exposed as do-nothing yea-sayers. According to Jesus, those who say, "Lord, Lord," to the triune God, but whose hearts are somewhere else will have no part in the kingdom of God either in this world or the world to come (Matt. 7:21).

Return to Freedom

Anybody who thinks about this can understand why Luther taught that the life of a Christian must be a constant, daily repentance and conversion and that it is not enough to have come to faith in the triune God just once and to confess him just once in our lives. We cannot manipulate God's Spirit, for he is neither an idea that we can comprehend and appropriate nor an impersonal force that we can somehow get hold of. God himself must give himself to us, and he does this in so far as his good news, the liberating and binding love of God, reaches us and inwardly moves us. The power of the Holy Spirit remains in us only if we keep turning back to God again and again. This is the biblical meaning of repentance and conversion. Conversion is turning to God at one point and then a constantly repeated daily turning to the God of love to receive his goodness, his comfort, and his direction. Just as love between married folks needs the repeated turning of one to the other in thought, word, and deed, so it is with faith in

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God and the Spirit of freedom who proceeds from him into the world. Fellowship with God, continuance in the knowledge of him, and therefore continuance in the Spirit of freedom is to be found only where men turn to God daily in thought, word, and deed.

Prayer, common worship with others, quiet openness to the testimony of the Bible, conversation with other seeking and believing persons—all these are necessary movements of the Spirit between us and God. Two friends who no longer have any time for each other or who think they have already said everything there is to say will in time be unable to sustain an inner fellowship with each other. Neither individuals nor whole nations can live their spiritual life indefinitely on "canned goods" without succumbing in the end to a kind of spiritual scurvy. Therefore for the personal, inner life of every man as well as for the political order of every Christian nation the question whether and where and how this encounter between the Spirit of God and the spirits of men actually occurs is of the utmost importance. Thus the question of the Spirit of freedom is inseparably connected with the question of actually putting our personal, spiritual life into practice and the question of the vitality and effectiveness of our churches and congregations.

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There is not only one, but many churches. In all churches not only holy but sometimes very unholy things occur. This being so, isn't it asking too much to expect a man to say, "I believe in the holy Christian church, the Communion of Saints"?

Many ask even more radical questions: Why do we need a church at all? Can't one be a good man and serve God without the church?

On the other side, of course, the church is patently surrounded by a certain mystery. Through all the catastrophes and upheavals which have turned everything upside down in the history of the world, the church has repeatedly risen like a phoenix from the ashes. At times it was declared dead, waiting only to be buried. Not much later it was the strongest power determining public life. What shall we think of the church? What is its destiny, and what *is* it, really?

The Nucleus of the Church

The word "church" comes from the Greek and originally was spelled "*kyriakos*," which means "belonging to a lord or master." Church is therefore the house community or the jurisdiction of a lord. It is not an association of members who belong to the same club. Rather, it represents a company of people who have come into dependence upon Christ.

This dependence, as we saw in the preceding chapter, is not a dependence into which men are brought by force. It is not the dependence of slaves who are forced into dependence by

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the threat of punishment. It is the dependence of love, which is born of men's realization that they owe everything they are and have to this one Lord. But they owe it not only to his boundless wealth but also to his self-giving love.

The church therefore is, or at least should be, a fellowship which is held together not from the outside but from the inside. To this extent the true church is the opposite of all communities that are held together by outward laws or by force.

Babel and Jerusalem

We all know that there are two unifying forces of community in the world: the community of love, in which everything is held together from the inside and each is for the other and the whole, and the collective community, which owes its existence to compulsion and power and in which the individual is forced to adjust himself by means of reward and punishment.

When people today discuss the problem of modern society, we frequently hear the word "integration." It means "the ordering of parts into a whole." Church and state represent two different forces of integration working from opposite directions. In the Bible these two binding forces of community are set over against each other in the symbol of Babel and the heavenly Jerusalem.

Babel is the city that symbolizes man's self-assertion and power. Babel arose from man's cry, "'Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth'" (Gen. 11:4). According to the Bible, the tragedy of this attempt of man to find community by self-assertion lies in the fact that in the end it always leads to its opposite; for the people who attempt to assert themselves by force understand one another less and less, the more their cohesion rests upon power. This is the meaning of the story of the Babylonian confusion of tongues.

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Against this tragedy, which is constantly being repeated in the histories of families, social orders, and nations, the Bible flings a great hope: The day will come when God himself will establish a new form of integration, a new community, which comes from God and has its source and its power to bind people together in eternal love. In one of the last chapters of the Bible the seer of the Book of Revelation sums up this hope in these words: "And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband; and I heard a great voice from the throne saying, 'Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away'" (Rev. 21:2-4). Just as in a planetary system the moons revolve around their sun because they are magnetically attracted to it, says the seer of Revelation, so one day in a new world all pain, all dissension, and all death will vanish away because all things will revolve around one central point, the magnetic power of the love of God.

The fulfillment of this hope is still to come. But the Christian creed affirms the conviction that the church is a beginning of the healing and saving of the world. For in so far as in the church men are actually brought into fellowship through surrender to the love of God in Christ, it manifests in this world a form of dominion that holds men together from within, without the use of force.

Characteristics of the State in the Church

Because we live in a world in which sin, selfishness, and the will to self-assertion tempt all men and since even the most devoted Christians are not exempt from this temptation, the church is different from what we would expect it to be, when

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we consider its innermost nature. In the two-thousand-year-old history of the church both church and state took on basic characteristics from each other.

Already in the first century of the church it was noted that even in the church the unifying, magnetic power of love for the risen Lord was constantly being robbed of its unifying effect by the opposing forces of selfishness, dissension, and uncharitableness. Even in the church not all contentious men can be won into fellowship by heaping burning coals on their heads. Many can be held in check only by the external means of compulsion and legal ordinances, in other words, through the means of power appointed to the state. When evil asserts itself force is indispensable. There is no church that does not enlist the help of civil power to ward off evil and protect its fellowship. Through the spread of evil and the force, inward or outward, which is used to combat it, Babylonian characteristics find their way into the church. Down to this present day it not infrequently happens that in the church too it is the will to power that triumphs, that the defenseless love of Christ is disregarded or trampled under foot and the freedom of the Spirit is stifled.

Stifled? No, this is saying too much; for Christ's promise that nothing in all the world shall ever really prevail against his church (Matt. 16:18) has been borne out down to this day. Even when the leading offices in the church, its constituted ordinances, and even a large part of its message had been invaded by the spirit of Babylon, the *kyriake*, those who belonged to the Lord, lived on in many families, congregations, and devout hearts and survived one Babylonian captivity after another. Therefore the church clings as always to the confession: "I believe one Holy Christian Church," because all churches have only *one* Lord. Through his love this Lord wins people, not merely in an invisible, but in a highly real and visible way, in all nations, churches, and congregations, and unites them in a real, effectual brotherhood and fellowship of service.

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The Church, a Cohesive Force in the State

Hence the church, because of its sins, can never entirely dispense with the means of compulsion and force in its own constitution. Conversely, the same applies to the power of the state. It cannot make possible or regulate or maintain a sound community of people by means of force alone. This applies most of all to the democratic form of state and particularly in the age of industrial society. In this form of society everything depends upon whether integration, the uniting of the parts in the whole, is achieved with the least possible friction. The greater the production figures become, the greater the division of labor, the more all people become involved with one another in one common destiny. Today it is no longer possible for a farmer to retire obstinately to his own land and live his own life. In this industrial society only when one is for all and all for one can human life prosper at all.

The more this process of industrialization and therefore the interinvolvement of men progresses, the more clearly do the possessors of power realize how basically impotent their means actually are. If a spirit of self-sacrifice, consideration, mutual understanding, in a word, love for people does not grow from within, such powerful frictions occur in the structures of humanity that the whole begins to run hot and breaks down. The great ideological potentates of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have therefore always attempted by means of education and propaganda to train people to conform voluntarily to the regime and support it of their own initiative. The supporter of the *status quo*, the hero of labor, the functionary are products of this attempt. Many of the phenomena of social and industrial psychology, the cultivation of "human relations," and similar endeavors of the Western world belong to an essentially higher stage in the sequence of these endeavors. Whenever it is thought that these efforts can dispense with a foun-

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dation in faith, they lack the crucial thing. Without the self-giving power of the love of God from within no human community is permanently viable. The natural force of love in individual men flags even more quickly under the pressure of modern mass society than was the case in earlier times.

Thus in this present-day world church and state are thrown back upon each other and must serve each other. This does not mean that the church exists for the sake of the state; for, as soon as this is its function, as soon as it becomes a political value, it has already lost its value even for the state. As soon as it departs from its center, from its devotion to the Lord, it becomes an untrustworthy propaganda institute.

Separation and Secularization of the Church

In Greek there is still another word for church, *ecclesia*, which means "those who are called out." That is to say, the church or a Christian congregation is a community whose children have been called out of their seclusion with themselves, out of their self-seeking and their preoccupation with transient things. The church is thus the very opposite of a ghetto. The ghetto is the closed community of Jews faithful to the Law who cut themselves off from the rest. The *ecclesia*, the community of Jesus, has often been confused in this way with a pious conventicle. A pious conventicle differs from the community of Jesus in that it revolves around itself and is concerned only with its own temporal and eternal salvation. But it is well known that what Jesus did was precisely to call men out of this conventicle, out of the pharisaic ghetto, out of worldly and spiritual self-centeredness. He called men to come out and accept his love. But when they accepted this love he sent them back into the world as torchbearers of love. He sent them into the Jewish synagogues and pagan market places as messengers of love, as lightbearers of the divine form of rule. He commanded them to be the salt and the light of the world.

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When that is what they are, they become an integrating force in all human communities; for Christians are meant to be the rule of God within the forms of community of social and political life, which means that in these forms they are to be the power that binds men together from within and draws them into the rule of God's love.

John Christopher Blumhardt, a preacher of the kingdom of God who was hardly understood in his own day, once said that every man must be converted twice. He must first turn away from the world and his own will in order to give himself wholly to God and his will. Then he must turn to the world as a person who no longer needs to live for himself and his own religious perfection. The Christian is empowered to radiate the light and the power of love into every sphere of this world, including all the ramifications of modern society in which labor is divided. The church—in so far as it is truly the church—also has this twofold orientation. It dare not surrender to anything except the love of God by which it lives. But even less dare it live to itself. It gains its own integration only by serving the world.

The Boundaries of the Church's Fellowship

Having dealt with these considerations, we can now address ourselves to the difficult question of where the boundaries of the church really lie, of why there are so many churches, even though all have only one Lord, and of which is the true church.

The center of the church is not a secular ruler, not the constitution of a society, and not a flag of any kind. Many of the legal ordinances of the church have been taken over from the sphere of law and compulsion and thus from the sphere of the state. All of this is merely scaffolding which the church cannot get along without so long as it lives in this sinful world. The scaffolding does not indicate the walls of the house. Much less is it a sustaining part of the house itself.

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The center of the church is the living and yet invisible Lord, whose Spirit, as Luther says, "calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth and preserves it in union with Jesus Christ in the true faith" (Small Catechism). This gathering of the church occurs in the midst of the world. The gathering occurs, as it were, around a central point, the banner that shows where the King stands, around which all loyal men rally. On the edges of a battleground it is often difficult to distinguish between friend and foe. Anybody who wants to know what is "church" must look to the center of the church and the forces that hold the whole together from that point.

One of the most eminent interpreters of the Bible in our century, Adolf Schlatter, described the boundaries of the church in this way: "The limit of the church is where the work of Christ ends." That is to say that one can define the nature and the limits of the church only by standing at its center and never at its boundary posts. Wherever the enlightening, attracting, binding, enriching power of Christ is at work in human hearts, wherever individuals or groups are committed to the service of Christ, there the true church is to be found.

Then is it not possible, we ask, to define the limits of the true church clearly and conclusively by means of creeds, or to guarantee it by means of authoritative offices, or even to document it by means of membership cards? No, this we certainly cannot do. Even the Roman Catholic church does not assert this. It is true that Cyprian, the church father, said that outside the church there is no salvation, and formerly the church concluded from this that all non-Catholics are damned. More recently this view has been given up even by the Roman Catholic church. So if even the Roman church, which asserts that it is the one true church and the sole possessor of valid sacraments, is compelled to draw such conclusions from the Spirit of Christ, then certainly all evangelical Christians should also be mindful of

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Christ's saying, "In my Father's house are many rooms" (John 14:2).

The Necessity for Regulations and Creeds

But you may say, "Then we don't understand why there should be all this controversy about church regulations and creeds and why the leaders of the church and its councils and synods have not long ago effected a union of all churches and the abolition of all confessional differences."

Anybody who asks this question is forgetting that we are still living in this world, in which we have the treasure of the gospel in earthen vessels (II Cor. 4:7). The vessel is equivalent to the contents, but without the vessel we also lose the contents. The message and the power of the love of God is carried by the church to all peoples and through all the centuries.

It does this by means of human words, through the service of human fellowships and human institutions. We cannot say of any theologically formulated creed or any organized church or any institution of Christian charity that they themselves are revelations of the truth and love of Christ and therefore manifestations of the true church. All too often the hairsplitting of theologians over terms and the domestic controversies in church institutions are not such manifestations at all. And yet these institutions have been founded and these creeds have been formulated as indispensable vessels of the truth and love of God which is borne by men through the history of the centuries. Creedal formulations and charitable organizations are like lanterns which are intended to carry the light and guard it against the winds which would extinguish it. All the creeds which have arisen in the history of the Christian church are intended to safeguard the message of the *one* divine Lord against the winds of strange doctrine. These lampstands are meant to carry the light of God and make it visible far out in the world. This is the purpose of creeds in the church.

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Throughout the centuries of the church one attack after another has been made upon the light of truth. Often enough the attack has come from within the church itself. Thus again and again it was necessary for Christians and Christian communities to take the light of knowledge given to them and put it on a lampstand in the form of a creed, in order to carry it unextinguished through many generations. Thus there arose a multiplicity of lampstands and churches, especially since the gospel was carried out to every different nation in the world.

Often these peoples lived far apart from one another without any exchange of thought. They developed inwardly and outwardly independent of one another. The Church of St. Thomas in India, the Christian churches in Abyssinia, but also the churches in the different countries of Europe had their differing external and internal history. This too contributed to the diversity of church creeds and organizations.

Tolerance Among the Denominations

No man can disengage himself in his speech and his understanding of the truth from the chain of history in which his personal life is embedded. Every man's insight and also the forms in which he expresses his faith are conditioned by his point of view. We will not capture the wealth of God and the oneness of truth and love simply by combining the multiplicity of voices into one tone. The unity of the church does not depend upon unity of organization, nor even upon unity in the formulations of its faith. The unity of the church of Jesus Christ within the multiplicity of churches, like the unity of a congregation, grows out of the multiplicity of its members. It emerges out of the mutual ministry of admonition and consolation.

Every church in which the Spirit of Christ is a living reality (this is probably not the case in all churches which bear the

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name of Jesus) is in duty bound to guard the light of its confession and set it on a stand.

Christians are allowed and even pointedly commanded to hold fast to the confession of the fathers. To disregard and brand the confession of other churches as heresy is by no means always commanded by God. We certainly ought to know why we are Lutherans and not Baptists, Protestants but not Catholics. But we ought never to forget that the life and the confessions of these other churches contain questions about God and gleams of the light of his truth which we dare not extinguish except at the peril of our souls.

Why, then, the institution of the church? The church is indispensable for us because without it the light of God would not have been handed on through history and thus would never have shone into our eyes and come into our hearts. Without the external form of the churches, without their congregations, works, and institutions, no brotherhood of Christians could have endured for long and no common service could have been rendered. The person who scorns the church is living, without knowing it, by the guttering light of his *own* spirit.

The Sign of Reconciliation

"Life is not the supreme good. But the supreme evil is guilt." With these words the curtain falls in Schiller's play *The Bride of Messina*. Every man who does not cheaply forgive his own sins knows that he cannot drop the curtain upon his own guilt. It remains, a sign etched into his life history, utterly beyond his reach. To be sure, there is forgiveness of sin; the cross of Christ sets it down in the midst of mankind which is guilty before God. But what must happen in order that we may have it? Have we any sign that assures us of reconciliation?

The Unstilled Consciousness of Our Guilt

There are graves which we men cannot approach without the shaming feeling of wrong that can never be undone. There are glass walls that have risen between two persons. Formerly they loved each other. Perhaps they still work beside each other day after day. But a wrong has come between them, and nobody knows how one can ever forget what is so deeply engraved.

We have some wonderful experiences of the love of God and of people. But there are also memories of responses we made to them, ungrateful, indifferent, weak responses. We cannot think of them without blushing.

We don't have to think only of big things, which the Catholics call "mortal sins." It is enough to be reminded of moments of weakness, as in the case of Peter. The fact that he denied caused him to weep bitterly.

We can repress all such memories of guilt into the subconscious and become more and more indifferent to the remem-

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brance of them. But he who realizes that this is to cease taking himself seriously cannot take this way out. One who takes himself seriously cannot get away from the question of what to do with guilt that we men can never make good. All guilt before God is this kind of guilt—it simply cannot be repaired. If only there were a sign that would make us sure, despite the graves and the brazen or glass walls, that everything has been made good and that everything will be put to rights! If there were such a sign that we could really depend on, we could confidently forget the past and look ahead with assurance despite the guilt. That would be a help indeed. After all, our rear must be secure if we are to be able to face what comes to us each day. Well, in the Christian faith we have been given a gift that is great beyond all calculation, for this faith teaches us and empowers us to declare without any fear of the past, "I believe in the forgiveness of sins." What real right do we have to believe this, if we are not trying to get off cheaply? Where is the sign that all has been made good? Is it the feelings of the heart? But these feelings are inconstant and changing. Is it the consolations of men? But these consolations never undo what has been done. Only if the Creator God himself, who in his power is able to put everything right and cover it all with his love, were to say to us that all is well again would this be a real answer to the question of guilt. Is there such a sure sign that God has forgiven our sin?

Cleansed by the Water of Baptism?

The Christian church declares that God erected two signs of cleansing: the sign of the water and the sign of the blood. The sign of water was known before the coming of Christ. John the Baptist employed it. He baptized in the water of the Jordan as a sign of purification and the forgiveness of sins. Long before this the prophet Elisha had enjoined Naaman, an army commander who was a leper, to take the bath of purification in

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the river Jordan: " 'Wash, and be clean' " (II Kings 5:13). The pagan commander expected that Elisha, the medicine man, would heal him with all kinds of magical hocus-pocus. But he learned that God's marvelous power can lend to ordinary Jordan water the power to erase what all the waters of the world cannot wash out; for it is not the power of the water but solely the Word of God which bestows upon the sign its cleansing effect.

Supposing that we were able to have the same experience in our conscience that Naaman had physically, we still must face the disquieting question, "What about the person who has been washed in baptism, but then later becomes unclean again?" We can't bathe in the Jordan every week. Even if it were so commanded in the Bible we could not deal with our sins simply by saying, "Let bygones be bygones." The washing of the conscience through baptism is necessarily something that occurs only once. It was this realization that prompted many Christians in the first centuries to delay baptism until they were on their deathbeds. This is what was done, for example, by Constantine, the Roman emperor who won his victories under the sign of the cross. Constantine knew very well how close sin is to power and this he feared, so he put off the cleansing remedy of baptism to the end.

Among us children are baptized soon after birth. They are washed of sin which they themselves have not yet committed. Many free churches baptize only adults after they have come to faith. Was not the way of Constantine better?

If the miracle of cleansing were accomplished through water, then everything would depend upon our touching nothing that was unholy after we had been washed. The central thing in baptism, however, is the Word of God which is bestowed upon us personally in, with, and under an accompanying sign. Thus baptism becomes the sign that God has accepted us as his children and therefore cleanses us as a mother washes her child.

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Baptism has a permanent meaning for one who really wants to be accepted as a child and thus become clean. We cannot go through our whole life being less than scrupulous about committing sins and trusting that at the end we shall be able quickly to receive the bath of purification before we die and thus wash it all away. Nor can we rely upon the fact that we have been baptized as children and therefore are the recipients of a kind of automatic divine purification. The fact that we have been baptized is a sign that God's love has been bestowed upon us. Baptism is like coming into an inheritance. It is the receiving of a testament, namely, the legacy that God bestowed upon us in the Old and the New Testament.

The Sign Can Be Disregarded

An inheritance has meaning only for those who enter upon it. Many people consider it a sign of weakness to turn to this legacy, the gift of the love of God, when they are confronted with their guilt and need. They don't want to be soft, even though they know that they need the love of God. Others are indifferent all their lives to this offer of love from the God who is willing to pay their debt as long as they are willing to be won to his goodness. For them too baptism is no mere ineffectual sign. Then it becomes the seal upon the word of judgment spoken by the world's Judge: "How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under the wings, and you would not!" (Matt. 23:37).

The divine sign of reconciliation, baptism, is therefore nothing less than a sign of the personal bestowal of the love of God. It dare not be confused with the promise that every now and then a "rich old man" pays our debts. We come out of the prison of sin only as we enter into and yearn to enter into the fellowship of the love of God. Baptism is therefore the personal bestowal of a gift and at the same time it means being bound by oath to the service of God and his church.

The Sign of Reconciliation

The Blood Brotherhood of Christians

This becomes even more clear in the second sign of reconciliation, the sign of the blood. The blood of Christ, the sacrifice of God's love, paid the debt. It was not merely the generosity of an infinitely wealthy God, to whom the payment would make no difference anyhow, that canceled the debt. It cost the torment of an innocent death suffered for love's sake because it could not be had for less. This sacrifice of love is bestowed upon us personally in the Lord's Supper, the communion of believers. Its central meaning is expressed in Paul's statement, "As often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (I Cor. 11:26). The proclamation of the death of Christ is the attestation of the love that it cost God as he sought to hold onto us. We cannot accept a sacrifice of love, indeed, a sacrifice of a life, as we accept a dollar bill which we put in our pocket only to pay it out again. Nor can we simply take note of the bestowal of such a sacrifice as we would note an item in the newspaper. We can accept it only with gratitude or love; otherwise we reject it. He who does not respond to it with his heart, saying, "I will thank thee and love thee," rejects it.

This response becomes a reality as we affirm our brotherhood with the children of God in all the world and live for them. The Lord's Supper is therefore not merely the imparting of a personal spiritual experience. It incorporates us into the visible community of Christians on earth, which is always a fellowship of sinners. He who is unwilling to commit himself to this community and place himself within it is by his very life denying that he has received the gift which the Lord's Supper bestows.

Absolute Certainty of Forgiveness

The two signs erected in the Christian church to show that

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reconciliation has been effected therefore possess both a liberating and a binding effect. They commit us to believe that God's love does not fail even in the face of the greatest guilt. Even if we have committed a crime that condemns us to utter worthlessness and contempt in the eyes of all men, the love of God would still accept us, like the love of a mother, with grief and tears and love and mercy. The sign of divine forgiveness throws up a dike against the flood of all the accusations of our conscience. For this is the message of the gospel: "If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies; who is to condemn? Is it Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised from the dead, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us? . . . For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:31-34, 38-39).

To accept the forgiveness of God means therefore to say an unconditional "yes" to the love of God. Included in this "yes" is the earnest will and the wholehearted yearning to be free from what separates us from God and also to be free from the evil that attracts us. This will to receive God's goodness joyfully is the sole requisite for a worthy reception of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

There are many people who are afraid to partake of this sacrament. They know that there is in the New Testament a statement that warns us against eating the bread and drinking the wine of the Lord's Supper unworthily. If we do, we become "guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord" (I Cor. 11:27). It would be a grave misunderstanding of this

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passage to think that the apostle was forbidding us to come quite simply, just as we are. There is no point in decking oneself out before God in some moral or spiritual way before one approaches him. The person who thinks this is necessary still has not grasped the greatness of his fatherly goodness. Paul is only reminding us of the fact that we cannot swallow the drink which is offered to us by God's love just as we would an ordinary drink. Anybody who regards the sign of love as something commonplace and trivial offends him who sends it to us. And this is the more perilous, the more he from whom these signs come loves us.

Evangelical Confession

Roman Catholics recognized a third sign or sacrament of reconciliation with God, namely, confession. It would be wrong to think that other Christian churches, the Protestant church, for example, reject the idea of confession. In the New Testament itself confession is urged upon Christians: "Confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed" (Jas. 5:16). Many people have found that their conscience was not set at rest by a general declaration of the forgiveness of sins and the assurance that God loves them. Only after they had confessed a particular sin and were assured of the forgiveness of this specific sin were they able to experience an inner release and believe that God had taken away their guilt. Confession is therefore a pastoral aid that helps a person to come to inner liberation; for unless we admit our sins and honestly face what we have done, we cannot be freed from it.

When we confess our sins privately in our hearts before God alone we may always have the feeling that nevertheless we have ducked the truth and failed in courage to face it fully. Therefore all Christian churches urgently counsel every person who is oppressed by a personal sin to talk it out and confide it to

another person who will carry it to God with him and then, as a minister of God, assure him of forgiveness. Nobody should allow himself, because of fear of the truth or anxiety that others will despise him, to be robbed of this gift of release. Confession is not a law imposed upon us and it is not a pious work to be performed with sighs and groans. Confession is, rather, more the experience of a man who has been carrying a heavy load on his back for a long time and finally comes to the place where he can lay it down. Anybody who has availed himself of confession knows the sense of liberation that follows upon this decision to be truthful when it is put into action before God in the presence of a brother.

Confession, of course, should not be made into an act of human self-liberation. Only God can remove guilt. It would be grave contempt for God and surely an irresponsible way of dealing with our own guilt if we were to think that evil doesn't matter much and that afterward it can always be gotten rid of in confession. There have been times when the Roman Catholic practice of confession has fostered these perilous misconceptions. This is the reason why, in the Reformation churches, confession, which is a human act, was de-emphasized in favor of what God does in his Word and in the sign of forgiveness. It was never the intention of the Reformers to abolish the practice of confession; it was not until later centuries, in the age of the Enlightenment, that the confessional boxes were removed from the evangelical churches.

Confession is therefore not a pious work performed by man as a part payment for his debt. Nor is it a prerequisite for the payment of the whole debt by God. Confession is, however, an aid to inner truthfulness in a world of pious sham. Christian faith in forgiveness consists in the certainty that when we are with God we are in a Father's house where there is no need to put on a pious show or to pay money in order to be admitted.

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When we are with God we are in a place where, without any fear or self-contempt, we can be what we actually are. That is why the man who finds the way to God's forgiveness for the first time also finds the way to his true self.

The Hope of Life After Death

The inescapable fact of death makes all optimistic interpretations of human existence dubious. If human life ends in the darkness of death, then it has no imperishable purpose and no ultimate meaning. The problem of good and evil loses its potency if there is no responsibility to an eternal Judge. The question of life beyond death is one that concerns not only those who can face the fate of death with a certain comfort in their hearts. It is the ultimate question that focuses all the questions of the meaning and being of man. What ground have we for the hope of an eternal life after death?

Jesus Establishes the Hope of Resurrection

Doubt of a resurrection of the dead and the message of eternal life is as old as the Christian hope itself. Already in Jesus' time there were philosophers and theologians who contested all right to hope for an everlasting life. At that time even the priesthood of Jerusalem was among the skeptics. They constituted the school of the Sadducees and were familiar with both Greek and Jewish culture. They considered themselves to be above the simple religion of the people. One day the Sadducees presented their doubt of the resurrection to the rabbi Jesus. They told him a scurrilous story about a woman who had seven husbands and survived them all. At the close of the story they confronted Jesus with a catch question which was designed to show the impossibility of all hope of resurrection. The question was: " 'In the resurrection, therefore, to which of the seven will she be wife? For they all had her' " (Matt. 22:28).

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Jesus thereupon gave them a classic answer: " 'You are wrong, because you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God. For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God, "I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob"? He is not God of the dead, but of the living' " (Matt. 22:29-32).

There is no clearer argument and definition of the Christian faith in the resurrection than these few words. In the first place, they signify a rejection of those who think that resurrection is synonymous with the reanimation of the dead and thus the beginning of a continuation of the previous life. On no account does faith in the resurrection of the body mean belief in the restoration and reanimation of the body in which we men have walked the earth. Hope in the resurrection of the dead is based upon faith in the power of God which is able to create anew in an unimaginable, different way what death has swallowed up (I Cor. 15:37-49).

It is nonsense to assert that such a hope is contrary to reason. Anybody who believes that God's Creator Spirit created the world cannot call in question the possibility that God is able to perform this miracle of creation a second time in any way he pleases. Thus Jesus told the Sadducees that their doubt of the resurrection was grounded in their ignorance of the power of God.

Certainty Is Based on the Faithfulness of God

It is true that Jesus' opponents could also point out that in that part of the Bible which was authoritative for them, namely, the Old Testament Law given in the books of the history of Israel, there was no teaching whatsoever of faith in the resurrection of the dead. This is correct. The theologians find its basis in the fact that the pagan peoples who surrounded Israel,

just like many primitive peoples today, were filled with fear of the spirits of the dead. Even today there are innumerable people who believe far more intensively in the spirits of the dead than in the eternal God. To this the Bible says "no." The spirit of a dead person is not a power of which we need to be afraid.

Nor can it be ascertained with certainty whether the men of the Bible believed in a "survival of the soul after death." Not a few theologians and historians of religion are of the opinion that belief in an indestructible soul substance in man is not in accord with the faith of the Bible. We can leave this undecided. What is certain is that Jesus in his dealings with the Pharisees never resorted to belief in the immortality of the soul.

Jesus refuted the Sadducees on the basis of the books of the Old Testament Law, even though nothing is said there directly concerning the resurrection of the dead. He referred to that memorable encounter between Moses and God when Moses was called to liberate the children of Israel. On that occasion God made himself known to Moses, the shepherd, in these words: "'I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'" (Exod. 3:6). To Jesus it appeared utterly absurd to believe that the Creator of life is a God of the dead. If at a time when the Jewish patriarchs had been in their graves for centuries God still rejoiced to be their God and Father, this means that the Word of life had been spoken over their graves!

There is no man who has surrounded his child with fatherly care who would stand idly by without doing something about it if his child were swallowed up by death. This would be conceivable only if he were powerless to save the child's life or to restore it. God has this power. Thus it depends entirely on whether there is any basis for the faith that God loves individual men as a father loves his child. For Jesus therefore the statement that God "is not God of the dead, but of the living" is a fundamental proof of faith for the hope of the resurrection.

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This, of course, is not a scientific proof which would be obvious to anyone. The person who does not believe or has not himself experienced God's love and care for him will never find anywhere in this world a sure clue to the hope that death is not the end of everything. All psychological attempts to discover something indestructible in the human mind, all spiritualistic experiments to bring about the appearance of dead spirits are powerless to illuminate the darkness that hangs over the grave. Only faith in the love of God can do this.

When it comes down to it, this faith is the only thing that Christians can say with any certainty at all about life after death. Their certainty lies in their faith in Jesus' message of God's love and the confirmation of that message by the resurrection of Jesus. This faith becomes a personal certainty when a man recognizes the living Christ in God's speech and action in his own life.

How Shall We Picture the Resurrection?

None of the questions that seek to fathom when and how the resurrection of the dead will take place find any clear and dependable answer in the Bible. It is true that many people conclude from Jesus' words to the malefactor on the cross that entrance into paradise occurs immediately after death (Luke 23:43). But this conclusion falls to the ground when we remember that in eternity there is no time (Rev. 10:6, A.V.).

Others conclude from a vision of the seer in Revelation that the Bible supports the view that something immortal remains when a man lies in the grave. But we cannot draw from the fact that the picture language of Revelation speaks of the altar of God under which are secured the souls of those who have died as martyrs (Rev. 6:9) any conclusions which will provide answers to inquisitive questions concerning the so-called interim state of man between death and the resurrection. In another metaphor the same seer speaks of the book of life in which

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are written the names of those who are bound to God through faith and love (Rev. 3:5). This image gives graphic expression to the substance of the Christian hope. Christians are convinced that God is not forgetful. Once he bestows his love upon men he remembers them for ever.

Therefore the Christian hope in the resurrection of the dead is closely connected with the Christian faith in the forgiveness of sins. Only our guilt, which makes us unworthy of the love of God, can shake our certainty of eternal life; for sin separates from God. The certainty of resurrection lies contained in the certainty of forgiveness, which has its historical basis in the message of the cross and resurrection of Jesus and is bestowed upon us personally in the reception of the divine Word and sacraments. Christians can therefore forego speculating about the details of the future world. Their one concern is the question of how they can abide in the love of God and give him thanks by the surrender of their lives. This love is our security against death.

Return to Full Humanity

In one of his books Adolf Schlatter tells of the death of his father. The latter was a simple, devout Christian. When at his deathbed his wife read to him the passage about the golden streets of the heavenly Jerusalem, his reply was, "I don't care for all that trash; what I long for is to fall upon the Father's neck" (Luke 15:20). Simple as it is, this story is a profound expression of what believing Christians hope for. Their hope of eternal life is not filled with all kinds of childish **conceptions and images** which will supposedly become realities in the life to come. They know that something greater awaits them in eternal life: the final and imperishable fulfillment of their life and being through communion with God. That is why resurrection is the return to full humanity.

Man was created to be the image of God. All the trouble

and disquietude of his life has its root cause in his fall from this unity of image and reflection. The hope of eternal blessedness is nothing else than the certainty that God will again lift this human mirror of his being from the dust, cleanse it, and fill it with the light of his paternal love.

What God does with those who have no yearning for his love, but despise and spurn it all their life long—this we can leave to God. The conviction that God's judgment must fall upon them has its basis in nothing else than the certainty that God never forces his fellowship and his love upon anyone against his will. Therefore, according to the Holy Scriptures, to despise the love of God is in itself the judgment that each man pronounces upon himself (John 3:16-18).

The renewal of fellowship with God is not something that takes place in a bodiless spirituality; for God is the Creator of all the fulness of life. The writers of the Scriptures of both the Old and the New Testament are agreed that all genuine life finds its being, its power, and its glory only in so far as it is awakened by the power of the love of God. Unlike the wisdom of Greece and India, the Bible asserts that every created thing that remains within God's ordinance is good. Therefore Christians yearn, not for redemption from the body, but for the fulfillment of the life of their bodies. They view all earthly life, in so far as it is pure, not as a renunciation of the eternal wisdom; for God is the Creator of all life and God is love.

Christians, when they remember the dead whom they loved and when they think of the life they look forward to for themselves, keep their eyes only on God and his merciful goodness. All their expectations rest in him and him alone. All the hopes of Christians are already contained in the psalmist's prayer:

"As for me, I shall behold thy face in righteousness;
When I awake, I shall be satisfied with beholding thy form."

(Ps. 17:15)

The Third Article of the Common Creeds of the Christian Church

I believe in the Holy Ghost; the holy Christian Church, the Communion of Saints; The Forgiveness of sins; The Resurrection of the body, And the Life everlasting.

—*The Apostles' Creed*

I believe in the Holy Ghost, The Lord and Giver of Life,

Who proceedeth from the Father and the Son,

Who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified,

Who spake by the Prophets.

And I believe one Holy Christian and Apostolic Church.

I acknowledge one Baptism for the remission of sins.

And I look for the Resurrection of the dead,

And the Life of the world to come.

—*The Nicene Creed*

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